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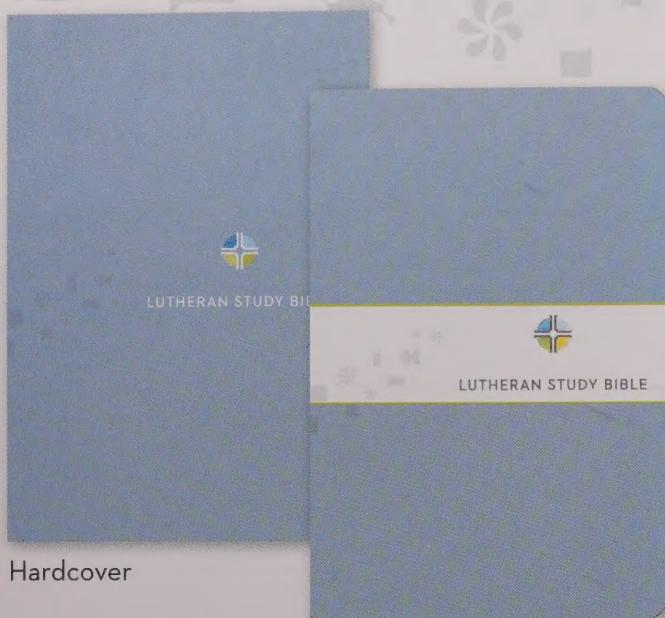
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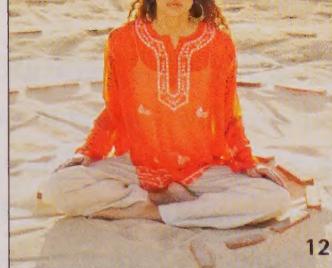
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PRAY ALWAYS

VOLUME 23 NUMBER 6 JULY/AUGUST 2010

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VOICES

Pray Always

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

“I’ll pray for you.” How many times have I heard that? How many times have I said it? Just today a reader called about the Bible study and during our conversation, she told me that her brother is dying and she’s having a hard time. I told her I’d pray for her. After I hung up, I realized I didn’t ask her name. I prayed right then and there—it’s too easy to say it and then forget about it.

I know that I’m sincere when I promise to keep someone in my prayers, but I get so overwhelmed with day-to-day living that I can’t keep up with my prayer list. How do I stay faithful to my promises and focused in my prayer?

A few years ago, I began a prayer journal in which I write prayer requests. It is just a cheap blank book. Sometimes I paste in photos of people; sometimes a newspaper story or a worship bulletin. I put a date on each entry and write the outcome later (if there is one). Now and then I go back and reread old entries and think of how it all turned out—the vocation discernment that led a friend to a new job, the prayer for healing that didn’t result in a cure but did give a family peace, thanksgiving for the kindness of a dear colleague who made a difference in my day.

The other thing I do is pray for people alphabetically when I can’t sleep. I start with “A” and remember to God everyone I know whose name begins with “A.” Then on to “B” and so on. It gets me out of my own worries and connects me to the great cloud of witnesses.

I figure it’s OK to pray at 3 a.m.—God is going to be up anyway. It also reminds me of how I’ve been blessed by the people in my life. However, it’s unfortunate for my friends later in the alphabet since I often fall asleep before I finish. Sometimes I start with “Zara” and work my way back to “Anne.” Just to be fair.

In this issue, you’ll find many tools to help you grow in your prayer life. From Kevin Anderson’s article on “Speaking with God: Conversation Tools” to Mary Lynn Hendrickson’s “Changed by Prayer,” you’ll find ideas to enhance your conversation with God.

Hendrickson tells the unlikely location of a revelation in her own prayer life—a men’s restroom. In that place, she writes, “I was overcome not only by the healing touch of God, but by the accuracy of a divine diagnosis. As a task-driven, do-it-yourself, eldest daughter of much-too-modest Midwesterners, I needed to hear that I was utterly worthy of God’s assistance.”

In “Between the Daily and Divine” Robert Benson calls us to action: “At some point, all of our high-minded intention and discussion about the life of prayer has to work its way into the daily of our lives. . . . At some point, we have to move from talking about prayer to saying our prayers.”

I encourage you to “pray always,” as our Bible study exhorts . . . and say a prayer for our staff here in Chicago if you think of it. ☩

Kate Sprutta Elliott is editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*. You may write to her at LWT@elca.org.



GIVE US THIS DAY

Comfort Zones

by Kay Falk

Sometimes God pushes me out of my comfort zone via an election: I recently came home from our synodical women's convention as the new vice president. At other times, God nudges me until I go new places.

So here I am just outside Guatemala City in La Esperanza, a dangerous squatter's district. I am surrounded by fences, locked doors, and a dump emitting acrid smoke. Assailed by the sounds of sirens, loud traffic, crowing roosters, and barking dogs, I can't sleep. Everyone speaks Spanish, but I know only a few words. I'm definitely miles outside my comfort zone.

My six traveling companions and I fly from Wisconsin to Las Esperanza to visit *Unidas Para Vivir Mejor* (United for a Better Life—UPAVIM). After the 2005 Triennial Gathering in San Antonio, one participant brought the story of this women's cooperative back to our synodical board. We decided to purchase and sell UPAVIM craft items at events. On this visit, I've filled a suitcase with items the co-op could use and have come to help. I'm comfortable doing that.

God has other ideas. These women don't need my one week of assistance—they need me to listen.

I hear stories from women not allowed the luxury of being comfortable. During a brutal 36-year civil war that ended in 1996, they were focused on keeping their families alive. All of them lost family members, homes, and a means to earn a living. Now they live in La Esperanza because there is nowhere else to go.

They tell me how Barbara Lorraine came to Guatemala to learn Spanish and work in the area's health clinic in 1983. She (and her Lutheran pastor husband) listened to the women's dreams for safe day care, a school, clean water, sturdy walls, and a real roof over their heads. Back then, she and 10 local women stepped out in faith, overcoming distrust of strangers, to work together.

I learn how they started with items made at home, selling them in the United States through Barbara's friends and contacts. They told stories of sending crafts north in travelers' suitcases. Tales of coaxing hundreds of signatures on a petition to get officials to reclassify a small plot of land for UPAVIM's facility. Eventually funds came in to build a facility, and then a school.

Today, 75 women work for UPAVIM. The co-op runs five programs: crafts, a medical clinic and lab, a children's center, businesses (a bakery and a soy milk project), and scholarships to help community children attend its own primary or other area schools. Crafts sales and minimal fees fund these programs.

I witness the importance of buying Fair Trade items to help people overcome poverty. I learn how one woman who listens and shares stories with others can affect lives. I listen and go home impelled to tell others—whether that makes me comfortable or not. ☺

Kay Falk is a free-lance writer and member of Trinity Lutheran, Fort Atkinson, Wis. She is vice president of the South Central Wisconsin Synodical Women's Organization.

You can support the UPAVIM women's cooperative through the Lutheran World Relief Handcraft Project. Learn more by visiting lwr.org/handcraft or call 888-294-9660. To find out more about UPAVIM, visit www.upavimcrafts.org.

BETWEEN

THE DAILY AND THE DIVINE

by Robert Benson



paraphrase a film critic whose work I admire, an artist lives a life somewhere between ‘the mundane and the marvelous.’ It is true of most of us, I believe. It is certainly true of people who pray.

I have spent enough time over the years writing and talking and retreating and studying and teaching about and around and over and through and inside and out of the practice of fixed hour prayer—sometimes called the daily office or daily prayer—to know at least this much: To pray this way is to throw down the anchor of your prayer life somewhere between the mundane and the marvelous, between the daily and the divine.

At some point, all of our high-minded intention and discussion about the life of prayer has to work its way into the daily of our lives. It has to be stuck in and around the schedules and chores of our days. At some point, we have to move from talking about prayer to saying our prayers. If the marvelous that is possible in prayer is to have a chance to appear, it will most likely be because we have done the mundane. The appearance of the Divine is often dependent upon the attention to the daily.

There are those among us for whom the life of prayer, of close communion with God, is ongoing. Such a thing is uncommon

and takes place in an extraordinary way. There are one or two folks like that in your life just as there are in mine. If you are one of those extraordinary people, I may have little to say to you about prayer, except to ask that you pray for me and other stumblers.

PARADOX OF PRAYER

Our hunger for deeper, richer, more constant life in communion with God demands that we be able to hold in tension things that often seem to be contradictory. Any attempt to be with God, whether in the course of our prayer and worship or in the course of our daily lives, has to be lived in the light of some sense of paradox.

God is within us and God is without us. Jesus is with us and Jesus has ascended into heaven. The kingdom is already here and the kingdom is still to come. We have been saved and we have yet to be judged. These are the paradoxes of our life with God.

Another such paradox is this: We make our acts of prayer and worship, but they are not actually for us. We do these things for God and then we are the ones who are changed. We offer our songs of praise, and we are the ones who are

moved to joy. We offer our thanksgivings, and we are the ones who are blessed by them. We offer the ancient prayer of the psalms, and we are the ones who begin to hear “the prayer of God that rises in our hearts,” as Father Edward Farrell says. We offer the gifts of bread and wine in Holy Communion, and we are the ones who are fed and strengthened and sent out.

“Experience has taught the race,” wrote Annie Dillard, “that these habits of life are not the means but the conditions in which the means operates. You do not have to do these things, not at all . . . unless you want to know God. They work on you, not him.”

But they work on no one if we do not do them. And they may not work on us the way that they might if we simply do them for ourselves for our own edification and entertainment or for our own spiritual growth, even. Worship is not really about us.

The practice of fixed hour prayer, the praying of the daily prayers, has within it the same profound paradox found in the worship we offer each Sunday. Very often we spend a great deal of time and energy in our personal prayer telling God all of the things we

YOU CAN LEARN ABOUT DAILY PRAYER IN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN WORSHIP (P. 295 – 331). THERE YOU’LL FIND THE PATTERNS FOR MORNING, EVENING, AND NIGHT PRAYER. THE DAILY LECTERNARY BEGINS ON PAGE 1121 IN ELW.

believe that God already knows and is already working on in our behalf, 'in ways far better than we can desire or pray for,' as the old prayer says. Such prayer is for *us*. The practice of fixed hour prayer is for *God*. And that can make a difference for most of us most of the time.

PRUNING OF PRAYER

I write this article in early March. In a few days, the spades and hoes and rakes that live in my tool shed will make their first appearance of the spring. Here we go again.

Sometime soon, I have to pull off all of the winter mulch, rake up the leaves that ended up in my yard over the winter, and turn over the dirt in the flower beds. I have to prune the roses and trim the hedges and cut back the monkey grass, put pine straw in the lower garden, and figure out a way to attach a rose-bush to the house, the climber that is so big now she keeps falling over and blocking the front gate.

None of which I can do in one weekend. So I have some yard work to do every day for weeks to come. And the truth is that the yard is not even going to look like much for some weeks to come. Not until the One Who made us all sends spring to us all.

There is a moment out there, though—a single afternoon or evening—when I will come around the corner and the roses will have

begun to bloom or the light will fall just right on the fountain or I will see the cardinals in the hedges, and it will take my breath away.

The next day, of course, I will have to weed the flower beds again. Weeds fall on the just and the unjust, you know.

Between now and the time we will put the garden to bed next winter, I figure I have about 12 moments of magic coming, and I could miss some of them if I do not do the daily work it takes to make such moments possible. I also figure it is worth every minute of work for those 12 moments, whenever they come and whatever they turn out to be like as they take my breath.

One of the reasons it is hard for us to take time to pray each day is that on most days, prayer is more like weeding a flower bed for the third time this month than it is some divine and mystical experience. For most of the time—for all time, according to the saints who have gone before us—our prayer has a kind of mundane, everyday sort of feeling. There is a blessed ordinariness to it. Daily prayer is not called daily for nothing, you know.

There is a temptation for us to feel as though our prayer and worship is not really worth much unless we are personally moved by it. If we are not emotionally touched, then our efforts do not seem very spiritual to us. At such moments, it

helps me to remember that liturgy is the work of the people, not the magic wand of God.

SACRIFICE OF PRAYER

To say my daily prayers is to say that I am going to keep doing my chores. I am going to keep pulling the weeds, even if it is a long time until the roses bloom. I will keep saying these old psalms until the prayer of God rises in my heart. I will offer my thanksgiving even when I am not very thankful.

I will offer my prayer and praise on the days when I am tired or distracted or busy. This sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving is not only a holy and reasonable sacrifice, but in the end, it may even make me more fully alive.

Sometimes it is hard to persevere in daily prayer because there is no immediate sense that anything is happening when we do. I only know this: If you want roses to bloom and take your breath away on some summer day, then you have to do some raking and mulching and weeding and pruning and waiting.

I also know that some evenings in May, when I go at dusk to check the front gate for the night, the breeze will be just right, and I will smell them—and the moment will be as holy as any prayer that ever rose as incense to the One who made us.

For those who are drawn to a daily regimen of prayer, there is a moment when the whole business, no matter how deeply we are drawn to it, seems to be a daunting task. The time and the discipline required to be faithful, the suspicion that on most days there will be no immediate return from it, a whole host of fears and doubts can hold us back. It has always been this way; it is not because we live in the modern age.

It helps to remember that we are to be about the daily of the life of prayer; the Divine will take care of Itself.

One of my friends used to say to me, "So you want to meet God. Exactly when and where will this meeting take place?"

I cannot tell you when God is going to choose to come and be with you as you pray. But the practice of daily prayer is not for us anyway. It is for God. There is no more guarantee that I will have some fresh and powerful sense of God's presence while saying my prayers each day than there is that such a thing will happen to me when I worship on Sunday either. But that is no reason not to go to church on Sunday.

From time to time, something fine may well happen to me while I am saying morning or evening prayer. But not if I do not take time to say my prayers.

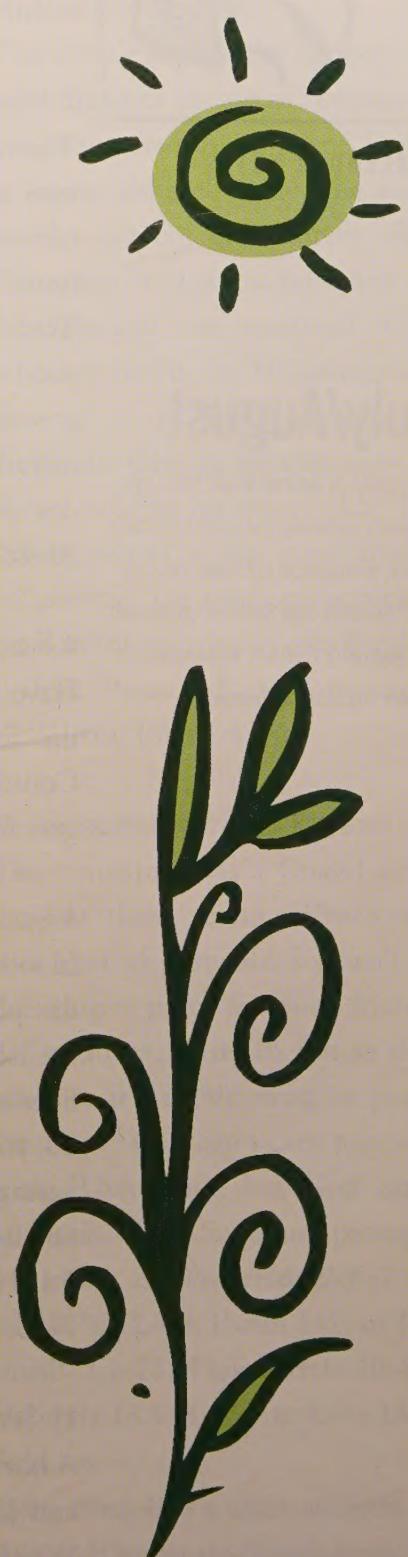
What I have to do today is go into the room and close the door. I have to open up the book. I have to make my offering to the One to Whom these prayers are made and the One for Whom these prayers are offered.

And those days when my prayers seem like one more chore I would like to avoid? In the Rule of Taizé, Brother Roger has written: "There will be days your [daily] office is a burden for you. On such days know how to offer your body, since your presence already signifies your desire, momentarily unrealized, to praise your Lord." He writes, "believe in the presence of Christ within you, even though you feel no tangible response."

I do not know if I will ever become a person of prayer. But I do know that there is only one way it will ever happen. People of prayer *pray—every day.*

I must make my prayer each day, make it between the mundane and the marvelous, between the daily and the Divine. 

Robert Benson hopes for and writes about and speaks on living a more contemplative life in the modern world. He lives and prays and writes and pays attention to the Holy in Nashville, Tenn. This article is adapted from his 12th book, *In Constant Prayer*. He invites you to be in touch at robertbensonwriter.com. He learned something about liturgy by paying attention to his Lutheran grandfather.





CALENDAR NOTES

July/August

compiled by Audrey Novak Riley from sources including the Lutheran Study Bible, Evangelical Lutheran Worship, and Sundays and Seasons, published by Augsburg Fortress, Publishers (www.augsburgfortress.org).

JULY

In the long green season after Pentecost, the lectionary's Sunday Gospel readings take us on the road from Galilee to Jerusalem with Jesus and his followers.

3 Thomas, Apostle

Thomas needed the evidence of his own eyes to believe in Christ's resurrection, but once he saw, he believed with all his heart, all his mind, and all his strength. Tradition has it that he carried the good news all the way to India, where a community of Christians bearing his name still thrives. The texts for Thomas' day are Judges 6:36–40; Psalm 136:1–4, 23–26; Ephesians 4:11–16; John 14:1–7.

4 Independence Day

Have you ever read the Bill of Rights, the first 10 amendments to the U.S. Constitution? The first clause of the Bill guarantees religious freedom.

4 Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

In today's Gospel, Jesus sends out the 70 disciples. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few," he says, and outlines exactly what the job includes. What do you think? Are we up to it? The passages appointed for today are Isaiah 66:10–14; Psalm 66:1–9; or 2 Kings 5:1–14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:[1–6,] 7–16; Luke 10:1–11, 16–20.

11 Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

A lawyer asks Jesus who his neighbor is and Jesus answers him with a parable. Which character in the parable is most

like God? Why? How? Today's texts are Deuteronomy 30:9–14; Psalm 25:1–10; or Amos 7:7–17; Psalm 82; Colossians 1:1–14; Luke 10:25–37.

18 Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

We get to hear the best Gospel stories during the summer! Today we hear about what happened when Martha of Bethany invited Jesus over. The Scripture passages appointed for today are Genesis 18:1–10a; Psalm 15; or Amos 8:1–12; Psalm 52; Colossians 1:15–28; Luke 10:38–42.

22 Mary Magdalene, Apostle

Just how blessed was Mary Magdalene, anyway? Very blessed. Read all about her in the July/August 2006 issue of *Lutheran Woman Today*, available on our Web site, www.lutheranwomantoday.org. The readings for Mary Magdalene's day are Ruth 1:6–18 or Exodus 2:1–10; Psalm 73:23–28; Acts 13:26–33a; John 20:1–2, 11–18.

25 Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

I love what Jesus says about prayer in today's Gospel passage—keep praying for what you need, he says. Be persistent! Today's readings are Genesis 18:20–32; Psalm 138; or Hosea 1:2–10; Psalm 85; Colossians 2:6–15 [16–19]; Luke 11:1–13.

26 James, Apostle

(transferred from July 25)

James and his brother John left their father's fishing business to follow Jesus.

ven though they are sometimes little too hungry for glory (see their request in the Gospel passage appointed for today), they are part of Jesus' inner circle. The texts for James' day are 1 Kings 19:9–18; Psalm 7:1–10; Acts 11:27–12:3a; Mark 10:35–45.

UGUST

The Sunday lectionary takes us further along in Luke's Gospel this month. What a blessing Luke's Gospel has been to the church throughout the ages, and what a blessing to spend so much time exploring it together throughout the summer!

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

In today's Gospel, a man asks Jesus to straighten out a family quarrel over an inheritance, but Jesus answers him with a parable. I wonder what the man and his brother did about the bequest after that, don't you? Today's texts are Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12–14; 2:18–23; Psalm 9:1–12; or Hosea 11:1–11; Psalm 107:1–9, 43; Colossians 3:1–11; Luke 12:13–21.

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Today's Gospel gives us a hint of Advent—Stay awake! Keep watch! The Scripture readings appointed for today are Genesis 15:1–6; Psalm 3:12–22; or Isaiah 1:1, 10–20; Psalm 50:1–8, 22–23; Hebrews 1:1–3, 8–16; Luke 12:32–40.

15 Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Jesus tells us in today's Gospel that he has come not to bring peace, but division. What could he mean? All we need to do is look around us to see that his prophecy came true: God's people are divided, even in what appear to be the happiest congregations. What can we do to help change that? Today's texts are Jeremiah 23:23–29; Psalm 82; or Isaiah 5:1–7; Psalm 80:1–2, 8–19; Hebrews 11:29–12:2; Luke 12:49–56.

16 Mary, Mother of Our Lord

(transferred from August 15)

The Gospels give us several words from Mary: to the angel Gabriel, in song to her kinswoman Elizabeth, and to her son Jesus. The only recorded words of hers to ordinary people like us are in John's story of the wedding at Cana. There she tells the servants, "Do whatever he tells you"; that is, "Pay attention to Jesus and do what he says." The passages appointed for Mary's day are Isaiah 61:7–11; Psalm 34:1–9; Galatians 4:4–7; Luke 1:46–55.

22 Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus heals a woman who had been crippled for 18 years. But what did the most religious person in town have to say about it? Jesus is showing us that there is never a wrong time to do what is good. Today's texts are

Isaiah 58:9b–14; Psalm 103:1–8; or Jeremiah 1:4–10; Psalm 71:1–6; Hebrews 12:18–29; Luke 13:10–17.

24 Bartholomew, Apostle

This apostle is generally understood to be the same person as Nathanael, who was called by his friend Philip to "come and see" if anything good could come out of Nazareth. Tradition has it that he preached in Armenia and was martyred there by being flayed. In Michelangelo's painting of the Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel, Bartholomew is shown holding his empty skin; his face is said to be the great artist's self-portrait. The readings appointed for Bartholomew's day are Exodus 19:1–6; Psalm 12; 1 Corinthians 12:27–31a; John 1:43–51.

29 Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

The point to today's Gospel is in the last three verses. What's the best kind of hospitality? It isn't in throwing a party for your friends and relatives, as much fun as that can be; it's in throwing a party for people who can never pay you back. They can't, but God can—and will. The Scripture passages for today are Proverbs 25:6–7 or Sirach 10:12–18; Psalm 112; or Jeremiah 2:4–13; Psalm 81:1, 10–16; Hebrews 13:1–8, 15–16; Luke 14:1, 7–14. 

Audrey Novak Riley is assistant director for ELCA World Hunger and Disaster Appeal.



Speaking with God

CONVERSATION TOOLS

by Kevin Anderson

Christian life is prayer. St. Paul's guidance to "pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:17–18) suggests that all of life is prayer. Every Sunday we are sent from our gathering around the means of grace to continue our worship, recognizing that all of life is in Christ. It is our prayer life that nourishes our growth toward living all of daily life in Christ.

Often, we talk about prayer only as our petitions to God. Our relationship with God assumes a two-way conversation in which we listen as well as speak. Martin Luther colorfully illustrates this saying, "If

we want our prayers to be heard, we must first hear God's Word; otherwise [God] will not hear us either, no matter if we weep and shout till we burst!" (Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought*, trans. Martin H. Bertram; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House).

With this encouragement, let's explore ways we can listen as well as speak to God, so our whole lives may be lived in constant prayer.

NOTICE GOD'S BLESSINGS

Begin by developing a deep sense of God's presence in all your daily activities. Notice the many ways God is blessing you throughout the week with gifts of grace and oppor-

tunities to serve others. Meeting people at work, on the street, or in the grocery store provides a chance for you to express God's love and care for them.

Experiencing the sights and smells of creation while gardening, walking, or cross country skiing are occasions to give thanks. Yoga, Tai Chi, or dancing provides avenues for your body to express itself in prayer. Knitting, reading, or taking a warm bath afford moments of solitude where your thoughts can turn toward God. Creative endeavors like painting, music, or journaling open endless possibilities for prayer. As you notice each blessing, offer a prayer.

FATHER RESOURCES

You may want to collect a few resources to assist you in prayer. The Bible and hymnbook are the two most valuable resources you can have at home to enrich your prayer life and family devotions.

Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW) is the latest book supporting the worship life of the church both in corporate worship and family prayer in the home.

The Daily Lectionary provides a set of readings for each day that relate to the Sunday readings. The daily readings reflect upon the previous Sunday's readings and prepare for the coming Sunday, creating a strong connection between your personal and family devotions and the Sunday assembly.

The psalms and hymns are the church's treasure house of poetic and devotional texts that teach us how to pray, speaking to many situations and expressing a wide range of human response.

The services of Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, and Night Prayer (Compline) can be modified for use at home.

Luther's Small Catechism contains simple forms of prayer in the morning and evening and at table. Devotional guides based on the daily lectionary such as *Bread for the Day* (Augsburg Fortress) provide a very simple pattern of prayer for individuals and households.

CREATE A SPACE

Create a sacred space for prayer in your home that engages all your senses. Arrange a Bible and hymnbook, cross, candles, icons, photo album, journal, and perhaps a comfortable mat for stretching. Women of the ELCA offers a free resource on creating sacred spaces at www.womenoftheelca.org.

Begin your time of prayer by lighting a candle or incense, drinking a cup of hot tea or coffee, stretching, or listening to music. Open the photo album. As you flip through the pages, pray for family and friends, people and places along your life's journey. Write down your thoughts as they come to mind in a journal. Don't think too hard about this—just write what you feel at the moment. Later, you may wish to read earlier entries to remind yourself where you have been on your spiritual journey.

PRAY WITH THE BODY

The body plays an important but often neglected role in prayer. Notice how the body postures reflect the spirit of the prayer in these Scripture passages: "After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you.' (John 17:1); "So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay

you everything.'" (Matthew 18:26); "And going a little farther, [Jesus] threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.'" (Matthew 26:39)

Probably you have seen or experienced these postures for prayer in Sunday worship. The presiding minister standing at the table, arms raised, eyes open, head up giving thanks over the bread and wine. The assembly kneeling, head bowed, hands clasped praying the confession. A candidate for ordination lying prostrate, face down on the ground at the invocation of the Holy Spirit.

Experiment with different prayer postures during your devotional time. Try praying the same prayer in various postures—standing or sitting, kneeling or prostrate, head raised or bowed, eyes open or closed, hands raised or folded. Notice the difference each posture makes for particular prayers. Then, incorporate those postures most meaningful to you into your daily prayer.

BREATHE DEEPLY

Ancient meditation techniques are valuable tools to relax the mind and body, creating a more favorable state of being in which to pray. Learning simple breathing techniques can help you relax your body and focus your prayer. Find a quiet place and make

yourself comfortable. Close your eyes and take long, slow, deep breaths.

Begin to focus your mind with very short thoughts as you breathe in and out. These “breath prayers” could be snippets of Scripture known by memory like, “Be still, and know that I am God!” (Psalm 46:10a) or

brief petitions like “Jesus Christ, grant me your peace.” Repeat the prayer several times. Continue to breathe deeply and slowly in silence, listening to your breath and to what God may be speaking to you.

Breath prayers are useful as you go about your daily routine

and also during times of anxiety, fear, frustration, or illness. Try this form of prayer when praying for others as well. According to the Mayo Clinic, prayer and meditation benefits both your emotional well-being and your overall health. Find out more about meditation and its

NIGHT PRAYER

Hold the cross in your fingers, saying:

Almighty God, grant me a quiet night and peace at the last.

Hold the first bead above the cross, called the Invitatory bead, saying:

Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.
You have redeemed me, O Lord, God of truth.

Enter the circle of beads. Hold the first large bead, called the Cruciform bead, saying:

Guide me waking, O Lord, and guard me sleeping;
that awake I may watch with Christ and asleep I may rest in peace.

Move to the right. The next set of seven beads are called the Weeks. Say the prayer as you hold each bead.

Hear my prayer, O Lord;

listen to my cry.

Keep me as the apple of your eye;
hide me in the shadow of your wings.

In righteousness I shall see you:
when I awake, your presence will give me joy.

Continue around the circle of beads three times, saying the prayers as you hold each bead.

Conclude the prayers by holding to the Invitatory bead and saying the Lord’s Prayer.

Finally, hold the Cross, saying:

Now in peace I will lie down and sleep; you alone, O God, make me secure.

or

The day is now past and I commit it to you.
I entrust to you the night;
I rest securely, for you are my help;
you are my refuge and strength;
and you neither slumber nor sleep.

Keep a time of silence for reflection and listening.

health benefits on the Mayo Clinic Web page at www.mayoclinic.com/health/meditation/HQ01070.

TOUCH AND FEEL

Prayer beads can be a helpful device to enhance the physical experience of contemplative prayer by using your hands to focus your mind and heart toward God. Prayer beads are used by many Christians, particularly Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Eastern Orthodox, as well as within the Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, and other faith traditions. Each tradition has a slightly different set of beads or knotted rope and way of organizing prayer. Inexpensive prayer beads can be purchased at many local religious bookstores and Web sites. You might even want to make a set yourself.

The organization of beads provides structure for the prayer. Your prayer may be the same each time or may vary depending on the time of day or current circumstances. The night prayer (p. 14) is an example using Anglican prayer beads. The prayer follows Luther's guidance to both listen and speak to God and is adapted from the pattern of Night Prayer in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.

As you gain experience praying with the beads, try to create your own forms of prayer that both listen and speak to God. The prayers on pages 72-87 of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* pew edition provide prayers on various topics that can be adapted for use with prayer beads. For more information on Anglican prayer beads and additional models of prayer, visit www.kingofpeace.org/prayerbeads.htm.

WALK A SACRED PATH

Labyrinths are found in many religious traditions around the world. The labyrinth began to be used for Christian prayer in medieval times. Numerous cathedrals in Europe have prayer labyrinths embedded into their floors. The Cathedral of Chartres in France has one of the most famous prayer labyrinths dating from around 1220.

To medieval Christians, the labyrinth symbolized the Christian path through life towards death and new life. For those who could not make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, walking a cathedral labyrinth served as a substitute. Today, the labyrinth is being rediscovered by Christians for contemplation and prayer.

The 11-circuit labyrinth is a frequently used design. The circular shape is symbolic of wholeness and its four quadrants the cross of Christ. The entry to the labyrinth symbolizes birth and the center a place of dying and rising to new life in Christ. Unlike a maze, labyrinths have only a single path to the center and back. The winding path is a metaphor of our journey through

life with all its twists and turns. The path to the center and back is led by God's grace.

Walking the labyrinth helps focus your entire body, mind and heart on God. It is an act of worship and prayer. You might walk the labyrinth to deepen your relationship with God, to give thanks and praise to God, and to pray for yourself and others.

As you walk the path to the center, use this time to release your stress, clear your mind and open your heart. The center is a place for prayer, contemplation, and enlightenment. Don't be in a hurry. Spend time listening and praying to God. Receive what is there for you. Then, return on the same path, knowing that God's grace leads and sustains you in the world.

In recent years, labyrinths have been built at churches, hospitals, and retreat centers across the country. Many are open to the public. A trip to a labyrinth makes a great outing for families and groups. Children enjoy the experience as much as adults. For information about labyrinths and how to build your own, go to <http://veriditas.org>. Find a labyrinth near you at <http://labyrinthlocator.com>.

Kevin Anderson is a liturgist and church musician in Chicago. He previously served on the churchwide staff of the ELCA in the worship and liturgical resources unit of the Office of the Presiding Bishop.



LET US PRAY

Waiting with Patience

by Julie K. Aageson

“Healer of our every ill, light of each tomorrow, give us peace beyond our fear, and hope beyond our sorrow . . . you who know our fears and sadness, grace us with your peace and gladness; Spirit of all comfort, fill our hearts . . .”*

The results of all the tests weren’t as clear as we’d hoped. The earlier removal of a fast-growing tumor was followed by weeks of radiation. Through it all, my father endured persistent pain and loss of energy, then loss of control of the left side of his face. Medications for controlling pain distorted reality, interacting with each other in frightening ways. The *joie de vivre* that has always characterized my father’s view of the world now seems to be buried beneath a fragile scaffolding of pain management, interrupted sleep, and constant awareness that his body has been invaded by dreaded cancer.

“In the pain and joy beholding how your grace is still unfolding, give us all your vision, God of love . . .”

Like so many others, we wait. We wait for all kinds of things: When will the economy begin to turn around? My child’s disability will accompany us throughout his entire life—how will we cope? We’ve been excluded from full participation in the church for such a long time—how much longer must we wait? Our plan was to have children—we dreamed of a large family—but our hopes have been dashed again and again. Will the body of a much loved husband, son, or brother, buried in the rubble and ruins of Haiti be found? And how will we heal from such loss and sorrow?

For months we’ve waited with patience, hoping our beloved father would be spared the suffering of cancer. Physically strong and always energetic, Dad’s enthusiasm and passion for life have been matched by deep faith. He left his first love of fisheries and the sea to become, of all things, a pastor.

My father’s encounter with grace and a loving God led him to seminary and parish ministry, the last place he ever expected. In retirement, he continued building boats hoping one day to sail them with children and grandchildren. But the cancer that has stalked him for months, perhaps years, has returned—and now we wait.

“Give us strength to love each other, every sister, every brother; Spirit of all kindness, be our guide . . .”

Waiting with patience and hope is a prayer of life, our prayer for each day. God is in the middle of our waiting, the essence of patience and hope, a holy presence in our everyday living and in our everyday dying.

In this summer of my father’s 85th birthday, we wait with patience and hope knowing there is nothing—not death, not life, not things present and not things to come—that will be able separate us from God’s love.

“Healer of our every ill, light of each tomorrow, give us peace beyond our fear, and hope beyond our sorrow.”

Julie K. Aageson is coordinator of ELCA Resource Centers and director of the Resource Center for the Eastern North Dakota Synod. She is a member of Bethesda Lutheran Church in Moorhead, Minn.

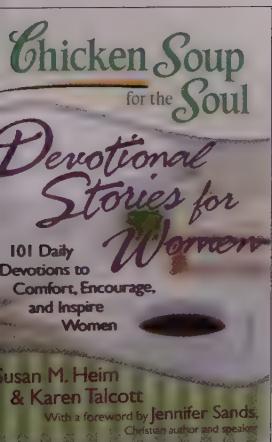
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WE RECOMMEND

Resources for action, advocacy, programs, or further study

Compiled from sources including
the ELCA News Service, Seeds for
the Parish, and www.elca.org



ELCA presiding bishop's town hall forum

The Rev. Mark S. Hanson, presiding bishop of the ELCA, responded to a variety of questions about the economy, ecumenism, evangelism, youth and young adult ministries, decisions of the 2009 Churchwide Assembly, and more at a "Town Hall Forum" in Chicago last spring. This was the second in a series of online forums hosted by Hanson.

The presiding bishop responded to 18 questions from a studio audience and members of the church watching online. ELCA Communication Services, which managed the forum along with ELCA Information Technology staff and others, reported the online video player for the forum was launched 2,296 times, fewer than the 3,148 launched for the forum Hanson hosted Dec. 6, 2009. However, members were encouraged to watch in groups this time.

You can watch the March 7, 2010, and Dec. 6, 2009, town hall meetings online at www.elca.org/townhall. You can also find out when Bishop Hanson will host his next town hall meeting.

Devotions to comfort, encourage, inspire

Chicken Soup for the Soul: Devotional Stories for Women is among the most recent in the collection of nearly 200 *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books. This book by authors Susan M. Heim and Karen Talcott includes 101 stories by 56 women of various ages and circumstances who share significant experiences in times of stress, challenge, or joy. Each story opens with a biblical quote selected by

the author that offers a faith insight into the experience and ends with a prayer that expresses a need for understanding, growth, or praise.

"Women have always shared life's experiences with one another," the authors write in their introduction. They go on to say that women gather to quilt and sew, swapping advice and offering comfort. "Women are created to be there for each other, and we continue to fulfill that mission in today's world. Women intuitively know that they can expand and enrich their lives just by gathering, talking, and listening."

Chicken Soup for the Soul: Devotional Stories for Women is one of the first devotional books offered through Chicken Soup for the Soul publisher. Purchase it at local or online bookstores.

Read our blog; become a Facebook fan

Women of the ELCA has several fun ways we reach out to you to let you know what is going on in the churchwide office, in congregational units, and around the world. You can read about what staff members think and feel on our blog at <http://blogs.elca.org/women> and you can become a fan of our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/WomenoftheELCA. You must first sign up for Facebook to become a fan of our page. On Facebook, you can meet hundreds of other women just like you who act boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ. To learn other ways to stay in touch, including our free *Bold Connections* e-newsletter, visit www.womenoftheelca.org.

Freed in Christ: *Race, Ethnicity, and Culture*

by Victor Thasiah

FACING GOD

- ❖ A Time of Vision
- ❖ A Time of Confession
- ❖ A Time of Commitment
- ❖ A Time of Spiritual Crisis

FACING OBSTACLES

- ❖ A Time to Take Culture Seriously
- ❖ A Time to Confront Racism
- ❖ A Time to Be the Church

DOING JUSTICE

- ❖ A Time for Public Leadership
- ❖ A Time for Public Witness
- ❖ A Time for Public Deliberation
- ❖ A Time for Advocacy

This ELCA social statement and accompanying study guide are available for free download at www.elca.org/socialstatements. You can order a free printed copy online at that address or by calling 800-638-3522, ext. 2996.

In 1993, the ELCA adopted *Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture*. As this church continues to engage these issues in its life, mission, and ministry, it's important to know about this early social statement.

The document begins by acknowledging one God and one Lord, Jesus Christ, and one humanity created by God. It also affirms that "Scripture tells of a diverse people reconciled to God through the blood of the cross, a people set free for the work of reconciliation." The

themes of oneness and reconciliation are central to the statement. The text further describes God's work: "Christ brings together the scattered children of God (John 11:52). The Holy Spirit breathes the freedom of the gospel into the church, where every people under heaven is represented." The introductory remarks conclude with the important claim that cultural differences matter, but God intends them as blessings.

The statement claims that Christ has broken down the dividing wall (Ephesians 2:14), and that "Christ, our peace, has put an end to the hostility of race, ethnicity, gender, and economic class." This assertion includes the confidence that "this good news sets at liberty those captive behind walls of hostility." But "because we are sinners as well as saints, we rebuild walls broken down by Christ. We fall back into enslaving patterns of injustice."

The text views the multicultural nature of society as both a given and a glimpse of the future. "We of the ELCA, with the whole Church, look forward to the time when people will come from east and west, north and south to eat in the reign of God (Luke 13:29)." Thus, our church is to welcome diversity. The statement

outlines commitments including membership diversity targets; organizational and leadership changes to promote multiculturalism; supporting ministries in African American, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, or other diverse settings; and advocacy to eliminate global racial or ethnic discrimination.

Although the ELCA has made some progress, the statement recognizes that the church continues to falter. "We of the ELCA too often react fearfully or grudgingly to the diversity of cultures." Instead of delight, there has been disdain for others who are different. "A wall of hostility stands intact. Captive on one side of the wall, people with access to opportunities and institutions are largely unaware either of their own cultural biases or the worth of other cultures. On the other side of the wall, people scarred by slavery and other forms of degradation and suffering have seen their cultures ridiculed and reviled, or destroyed."

The text argues that the ELCA has not moved beyond an assimilation approach to culture, "where the assimilated are those who adopt the values and behavior of the dominant culture." In this way, sadly, the

church mirrors society. "Our society has melded many European ethnic groups into mainstream America, but it has included people of other cultural identities only insofar as they have taken on the values and behavior of the dominant culture."

The statement defines and addresses racism. "Racism—a mix of power, privilege, and prejudice—is sin, a violation of God's intention for humanity." Such racism erects barriers, dividing and deforming both church and society. "Our mission and ministry are in a society where white people have been favored and hold unequal power to implement their prejudices—socially, politically, and economically. What has been the case is *still* the case: skin color makes a difference and white people benefit from a privileged position."

Nevertheless, the church has a vision that breaks through the brokenness. "We are one in Christ. As the body of Christ, we are free to live out our connectedness with each other." The statement outlines expectations it has of church leadership ranging from naming the sin of racism and leading the church in repentance to continuing to challenge the church to be in mission and ministry in a multicultural society.

What does this mean? "For some, this may mean giving up power or privilege; for others, it may mean giving up anger or prejudice."

Finally, the text discusses how to do justice. The church's pursuit of justice involves: 1) resisting cynicism; 2) refusing to blame victimized people for their situations; 3) assuring the participation of all people; and 4) addressing the relationship between racism and social issues such as immigration, crime, and environmental pollution, and how economic forces work against people of color in housing, medical care, education, and employment.

The church commits to involvement at all levels of public life, "globally and locally, nationally and in neighborhoods." In its commitment to open communication, moral deliberation, and working for justice for all, the church can serve as a model.

The statement shows both resolve and repentance, and has had a significant impact on the ELCA. To see what this church was thinking in the early '90s about race, ethnicity, and culture, *Freed in Christ* is the place to start. ■

Victor Thasiah is assistant director for studies in ELCA Church in Society.



HEALTH WISE

The Skin You Are In

by Molly M. Ginty

It itches, burns, sheds, dimples, and wrinkles, regenerating every four weeks.

Your skin covers every inch of you, keeping you at a comfortable temperature and allowing you to enjoy the sensation of touch. If you went without it, you would literally evaporate. But if you treat it well, it will protect you against infection, disease, pollutants, and every imaginable onslaught from the sun's burning rays to life's occasional stumbles and spills.

In the hot swelter of July and August, when you're baring more skin than at any other time of the year, how can you keep your skin glowing with good health? For summer skin smarts—and for tips that will keep you looking and feeling great all year round—here's a simple, straightforward guide for your body's largest organ and tips on how to care for the skin that you're in.

A miracle of engineering, your skin is an insulating shield that stretches for some 20 square feet and weighs a total of eight pounds. Shifting and bending with your every move and shedding up to 40,000 cells per minute, it consists of three layers: the epidermis (a waterproof barrier that is 10 times thicker on the soles of the feet than it is on the eyelids); the dermis (home to the blood vessels, connective tissue, hair follicles, nerve endings, and sweat glands); and the hypodermis (site of the connective tissue and fat reserves).

Just as your skin is a reflection of your general health, growing pale if you're

anemic and gaining a yellow tint if you have liver disease, so, too, can it develop ailments of its own. It can erupt in acne, which affects 85 percent of people. It can itch with eczema, an inflammation that causes red rashes. To keep your skin free of these problems (and dandruff, fungal infections, abscesses, scabies, and warts), it's essential to seek medical treatment whenever these ailments arise. Often, you can avoid them altogether if you simply cleanse your skin daily and give it the hydration and nutrients it needs.

Though cosmetic companies would have you believe that \$200 potions are essential for healthy skin, expert dermatologists say otherwise. "You don't really need an expensive lotion to keep your skin in great shape," says Dr. Linda Stein Gold, a spokesperson for the American Academy of Dermatology. "But you do need a quality, thick moisturizer, which you should apply once a day immediately after bathing to help seal as much water as possible in your skin."

Just as your skin thrives on the hydration provided by applying lotion and by drinking eight eight-ounce glasses of water per day, it also flourishes when you offer it nutritious food. "To have really healthy skin, it's vital that you eat a healthy diet," says Christine Gerbstadt, a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association.

To keep your skin soft and supple, reach for five weekly servings of fish rich in omega-three fatty acids; five daily servings of vegetables and fruits high in vitamin C (such as broccoli, berries, and

This ongoing column is part of the Women of the ELCA health initiative, Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls. Visit www.womenoftheelca.org for more information.

melons); and regular snacks that are rich in unsaturated fats (such as nuts and avocados). These foods will help hydrate your skin and will help keep it glowing by stimulating blood circulation. (Massages and 30 minutes of daily exercise can also improve circulation.)

Along with these food "dos," remember important food "don'ts."

Avoid saturated fats, which are found in fried foods, fatty meats, and ice cream and which dehydrate skin and inhibit circulation. Also steer clear of foods with a high glycemic index. These include white sugar, white flour, and white pasta, all of which can exacerbate adult acne.

Your skin not only needs healthy food, it also helps you metabolize what you eat. Your body's largest organ is the one responsible for making vitamin D, an essential nutrient that converts calcium into bone and protects against diabetes and cancer. To help your skin make enough D, consume at least 400 IU of this vitamin (found in salmon, mackerel, and fortified milk and cereals) each day. Also try to expose your skin to 10 to 15 minutes of sunlight three to four times per week, as sun exposure prompts the skin to manufacture sufficient D.

Even though the sun may call to you during these warm-weather months, go easy on outdoor exposure. Skin cancer has spiked sevenfold in women in the past 35 years as the ozone layer

thins, more skin-damaging ultraviolet (UV) rays reach the earth's surface, and more and more women confuse looking tanned with looking healthy.

To avoid becoming one of the one in five Americans who develop skin cancer, skip outdoor tanning this summer and shun tanning beds the rest of the year.



To keep your skin soft and supple, reach for five weekly servings of fish rich in omega-three fatty acids; five daily servings of vegetables and fruits high in vitamin C (such as broccoli, berries, and melons); and regular snacks that are rich in unsaturated fats (such as nuts and avocados).

Try to stay indoors from 10 p.m. to 4 p.m., when UV rays are strongest.

Every two hours that you are outside, reapply sunscreen that has an SPF of at least 15. Watch your skin for unusual growths or moles, and report any changes to your doctor. If you have fair skin or a family history of skin cancer, consider getting a skin exam from a dermatologist every year starting at age 40 or 50. 

Molly Ginty lives in New York. Her work has appeared in *Women's eNews*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Ms.*

For more information:

American Academy of Dermatology
www.aad.org

PRAYING IN SONG

by Jane Redmont



You've probably heard this story, or one very much like it. An elder, living with Alzheimer's, has stopped recognizing his family and can no longer take care of himself. With



sorrow and some guilt, his wife and children make the difficult decision to move him to residential care. The residence is Lutheran (or Episcopal or Methodist) and has a chaplain who comes regularly for services. Often a staff person or family member visits as well and plays hymns on the piano for the residents. When this happens, the elder perks up, recognizes the hymn, smiles, and hums along in tune.

Music, especially song, is often the most lasting memory in our minds and hearts. Song is also the first prayer many of us learn, before we know the meaning of words, sitting at our mother's knee or leaning against a sibling in church.

Why is it, then, that we do not always think of using song when entering our private devotions?

STREAM OF TRADITION

Our private prayer is not separate from public worship. They are part of the same live stream of Christian tradition. Like a current of water in this stream, music carries us along. Sometimes we enter it willingly; sometimes it is simply there to bear us on, even or especially in times when our will fails us, our energy flags, or our spirits are low.

But music is also there to help us celebrate and give glory to God, not only when we are physically in the worshipping community but

also when we are physically alone. Song is prayer. Song teaches. Song survives. Song, perhaps more than any other part of the Christian tradition, carries us when we cannot carry ourselves.

I have had this experience several times, sometimes in church, sometimes alone at home or in the car. When I was recovering from depression 15 years ago, struggling to find new ways to pray, the Taizé chants, gospel songs, and sung psalms on cassette tapes in my car brought me back to awareness of God's presence. I sang along as I drove. Prayer in silence or words was almost impossible for me at the time. Praying in song steered me home.

Again this past winter, in a dry period filled with a workload over which I had no control, discouragement, and distraction, I rediscovered some of the Taizé chants I loved and was led out of the wilderness on a current of song.

SONGS THAT REVIVE

The chants of Taizé speak deeply to me not only because I have heard and sung them here in the United States but even more because as a young person in France, I spent time at the Taizé community during my formative years. If I had to point to one place where I learned both to pray and to "be church," that would be it.

For other people the place and the songs are different. It matters little what your song or songs are. What matters is to rediscover them, or to discover them for the first time, and to enter into them—or just to let them wash over you. They may be old familiar hymns, contemporary praise tunes, Bach chorales, chants from the eighth, 12th, or 20th century, gospel, spirituals, songs from Iona or Holden Evening Prayer. What is the song that revives you? Which music draws you back to Christ? What tune reminds you of the love of God?

With a very few exceptions, all Christian churches sing. The art of music is matched only by the visual glory of architectures and icons—though not all parts of the Christian family worship with the help of images. About music, however, there is no disagreement. Primitive Baptists who allow no instrumentation still sing. Quakers who worship in silence still have a tradition of song. Russian Orthodox, Catholic, and Pentecostal Christians, Vietnamese and Zambian and Swedish Christians, all sing in some form, whether the authors of these songs are known or unknown, anonymous or collective.

SONGS THAT LAMENT

I think about the religious power of song when I teach my course in African American Religion and

Theology. I always play music at the beginning of class, and for the first several weeks, when we study slave religion, we listen to spirituals.

Unlike gospel music, the spirituals have no known author. Born in the dehumanizing experience of slavery, spirituals are vehicles of a powerful spirituality and distinctive theology. Slaves who were ripped away from their African nations, tribes, and cultures composed with shouts and moans because they had no common language but the groaning sounds of suffering. Once slaves learned to communicate among themselves, they composed—with no paper, within African traditions, and with powerful images ripped from the Bibles of their oppressors—songs that remain classics today.

Most of the spirituals, like the Psalms, are laments. They weep, implore, speak to God from the depths of despair. Others are multilayered, coded messages about escape from slavery. The spirituals are filled with biblical images of struggle, healing, and triumph. In them Jesus Christ is king, companion, liberator, suffering brother, mother, friend.

Lament, so crucial to the spirituals' beauty and survival, is a neglected practice in a culture obsessed with positive thinking. Yet it is one of the most ancient and honored traditions of the church, of Jewish tradition which gave us

the Psalms—the same Psalms Jesus knew and recited—and indeed of most religious traditions.

We are called to be people who praise, but we are also people who suffer, and God wants us honest, just as we are. Jesus, who knew and knows human suffering, is present in our times of trouble. Alone, like our ancestors, we can sing this trouble to the Lord.

SONGS THAT ARE NEW

Laments as well as songs of joy need not have words. “Alleluia” itself is sound as much as meaning. We may feel inhibited about intoning a hymn as we take a walk or clean the house, but humming comes more easily, and soon we may find ourselves singing the words—or not. Location can make a difference, of course: It is easier to belt out hymns alone in the car than on the subway, though I once met a man who sang hymns on his bicycle regardless of who might hear him.

There are places of prayer, and thus places of song, other than church or the corner of the bedroom where the Bible sits: kitchen, living room, garden, and that contemporary chapel, the morning commute. (“Jesus rides in the passenger seat!” one of my friends said to me.) And though beauty is a gift and a talent, God does not need us to be in tune—only attuned, attuned to the Presence.

"My prayer had become stale," said a woman I interviewed for my book on prayer, "so I began singing it." Music is a language. But language is also music! The rhythms and sounds of a language different from our own (or of our second language if we are bilingual) can infuse our prayer with new life. If you speak more than one language, pray with that other music, whether it is a song or the Lord's Prayer or a psalm, or your own words of praise, petition, or lament. Spanish, German, Mandarin, Ojibwe, or American Sign Language: each has its own music.

Our "change in music" can also be as simple as a different English translation of the Bible from the one we usually read and with which we usually pray. The rhythm and sound of the Magnificat of Mary or of the Lamentations of Jeremiah take on new dimensions in different versions, whether in English or in another tongue.

Is changing our song always necessary? Of course not. Returning to the familiar may be just what we need. It may also be that we need to sing a new song, not just in community but in our private prayer. Prayer involves both the faithfulness of routine and the need for refreshing change. It is up to us to discern—sometimes with the help of a friend, pastor, or spiritual guide—which one we need. We might just need a change in routine.

BEYOND OUR OWN WORDS
I have been writing about singing out—or humming, or groaning—our mood and our experience. Yet there are times for expressing, or listening to, what we do not feel. The liturgical seasons call us to this: Sometimes we are ready for Advent or Lent or Pentecost and sometimes we are not. The seasons of the church are there whether or not we are inclined toward their message and mood.

Jane Redmont will be one of the workshop and worship leaders at the Women of the ELCA Triennial Gathering, July 14–16, 2011, in Spokane, Wash. You can find out more about the Gathering by going to the Women of the ELCA Web site at www.womenoftheelca.org/triennial1.

But prayer can re-center us and also guide us beyond ourselves, our ego, our personal concerns, our neighborhood, our country. So, too, prayer that is song. Try singing a song of praise when your heart is weeping. Or when you are happy, sing a song of lament that draws your heart into the suffering of others.

Many of us have experienced this dynamic with the psalms: often they speak precisely what is in our hearts, and often they do not.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote of the Psalms: "We must ask how we can understand the Psalms as God's Word, and then we shall be able

to pray them. It does not depend, therefore, on whether the Psalms express adequately that which we feel at a given moment in our heart. If we are to pray aright, perhaps it is quite necessary that we pray contrary to our own heart. Not what we want to pray is important, but what God wants us to pray" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*).

We pray our psalms and songs to speak to God, but also to get beyond our own words and will and to hear God, to let the Word interrupt us.

We can invest ourselves deeply in sung prayer, probably because song involves the body and the breath in ways that other forms of prayer do not. Song concentrates and unites the heart, the will, the intellect, and the body. Breath draws them all together.

Song, quite literally, pulls us together. And so we become more deeply attuned to the One who is always present, in suffering and in joy, and who waits for us inside the song. ■

Jane Redmont is the author of the book *When in Doubt, Sing: Prayer in Daily Life*, which is not only about singing. A professor of religious studies at Guilford College in Greensboro, N.C., she has worked in campus, parish, and urban ministries and is preparing for ordination in the Episcopal Church. She blogs at <http://actsofhope.blogspot.com>.

God, grant me the
serenity to accept the
people I cannot change



Changed by Prayer

by Mary Lynn Hendrickson

Most of the time when God speaks to us, it's in that manner described in 1 Kings 19—"not as a roaring wind or rumbling earthquake but as a still small voice" (KJV). At other times, though, even the Creator of the Universe can't afford to be subtle.

In the case of Moses, a flaming bush was required. Poor Saul needed to be knocked from his high horse for Christ to get a word in edgewise. In my own case it was the stall of a men's restroom where the Almighty recently hit me upside the head. God stopped me in my tracks with a divine version of the Verizon commercial—the one where the guy says, "Can you hear me now? Good!"

I had already done four errands on that Friday and was at church to drop off a veggie tray for a women's retreat when my bladder shrieked its impatient reminder. Since I'd hurried from the house that morning without stopping for a bathroom break, I sprinted down the hall, flinging open the first door labeled "Women's."

I froze when I saw the long line of urinals. Silently they seemed to mock me: "Wrong again! Always running around like a chicken with her head cut off, and look what it gets you!" Halfway into a heel turn, though, I realized I had read the sign correctly. Of course! In anticipation of so many women at the

retreat, the planners went through the building with paper signs, turning most of the men's restrooms into women's. Relieved, I took refuge in the last stall.

Turning to lock the metal door behind me, my mind began to race: Would I have time to get to Costco before my afternoon mammogram? Did our paychecks clear yet? Could I afford a trip to Costco if our pay-

checks didn't clear yet? Why didn't I check our bank balance before dashing out the door? And why didn't I check with the insurance company to be sure my mammogram was covered?

I glanced up to find a second sign posted on the stall door by the retreat team. It had the look of those cheesy e-mails some women share with all their female friends, authored by "Anonymous," punctuated with bad computer graphics and an abundance of exclamation points. Hoaky or not, it spoke to my harried heart a truth so basic—and basically overlooked—that I was afraid I would break down and cry.

It said: "Good Morning, this is God. I will be handling all your problems today. Please remember, I will not need your help!!! If life happens to deliver a situation that you cannot handle, do not attempt to resolve it. Kindly put it in the SFGTD (Something for God to Do) box. It will be addressed in My time, not yours. Once the matter is placed in the box, do not hold onto it or attempt to remove it. Holding on or removal will delay the resolution of your problem.

If it's a situation you think you are capable of handling, please consult Me in prayer to be sure it's the proper resolution. Because I do not sleep nor do I slumber, there is no need for you to lose any sleep. So rest, my child. I love you!"

Other words followed, but they didn't register. My mind was flooded by unexpected grace. I was overcome not only by the healing touch of God, but by the accuracy of a divine diagnosis. As a task-driven, do-it-yourself, eldest daughter of much-too-modest Midwesterners, I needed to hear that I was utterly worthy of God's assistance. What's more, I needed the well-meaning threat of a hand slap for attempting to pull any problem back from God, to tinker with it myself, or fret about an outcome.

Seeking serenity

As Paul writes in Romans 8:26, "We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes for us" (RSV). And sometimes, as luck would have it, the Spirit even uses Facebook. On that same morning, a friend posted this light-hearted tweak of Reinhold Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the people I cannot change, the courage to change the one I can, and the wisdom to know it's me." Putting two and two together that day, something clicked: Whenever I'm overcome

by a whirlwind of activity, I'm tricked into thinking I must solve everything myself. It's my people-pleasing tendency that stirs up this perfect storm within. I try to be all things to all people, saying yes to things I shouldn't or going the extra mile to score points with someone who's a pain.

Alas, I'm not a circus performer—I can only juggle so much—and things start to crash down around me. On the job, I start running late. At home, I get too busy or distracted to clean up after myself. Ultimately, my family ends up as peeved with me as my co-workers. So much for people pleasing!

Letting go

The Lord knows I've tried to pray myself out of my rushaholic ways. And I have had help: Several of my mentors are people who've transformed their lives through the spiritual focus of Alcoholics Anonymous. One taught me that first part of the real Serenity Prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference."

But how many times had I tried another AA axiom—let go and let God—without feeling a moment's peace? How many times had I tried to petition my anxiety away or tried to meditate to sedate my racing mind? Something about that bath-

room greeting sign got through to me, though, so when I got home that day I printed out the phrase "God, grant me the serenity to accept the people I cannot change." Versions of it are now taped to my computer, the dashboard of my minivan, and my bathroom mirror at home. For even though I know that God is with me always, so is the old habit of worrying about other people's expectations and opinions of me.

This little catchphrase is the spiritual aide I need to "let go and let God." It's become a spiritual discipline in the way theologian Richard Foster describes spiritual disciplines: something that creates enough of a space in our lives for God to enter in and change us. It's even a mindfulness meditation whenever the urge to mindlessly multitask—who am I trying to please now?—sneaks up on me.

Changing you

"Prayer may not change things for you, but it sure changes you for things," said Samuel Shoemaker, an evangelical minister who helped start the Oxford Group, which in turn launched Alcoholics Anonymous. Mindful attention to whatever triggers my mindless rushing is the single biggest change I'm trying to make in my prayer life at the moment. My "God, grant me the serenity to accept the people I cannot change" mantra works won-

ders, but so does a small strand of prayer beads.

Sometimes, when anxious thoughts tempt my mind to wander off in a dozen directions—when I'm driving, for instance—simply clutching that string of nine beads is the physical reminder I need to keep me relentlessly in the present. The hard smoothness of the stone beads reminds me that God is my rock and strengthens out the most jagged of predicaments if I slow down and ask for help.

When I'm praying with my small strand of beads, one prayer I make myself speak slowly and mindfully is the Lord's Prayer. The older I get, the more I realize how wise Jesus was to give us this prayer as an example of how to thrive in our relationship with God. Among other things, it points to the many ways that prayer is meant to change us as Christians.

The Lord's Prayer

"Our Father who art in heaven" is a constant reminder that any *me* I pray about is really a *we*. I am called to include the needs of my sisters and brothers, but also humble myself by asking others for their prayers and help.

"Hallowed be thy name" speaks squarely to the kind of anger and impatience that prompts me to

mindlessly take the Lord's name in vain. If it doesn't calm me, it at least makes me attentive enough to say "I'm sorry, God!" whenever I let loose with the Lord's name to do anything other than bless what I might find in God's creation.

"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Whenever control becomes an issue for me—which is often in my rush

pardoning not only the imperfections of our neighbor but (much trickier business) the flaws we're ashamed of in ourselves.

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Being merciful with ourselves should never be an excuse to harm others or cause further harm to ourselves. Whether it's an extra cookie that we want or the reputation of a colleague we're tempted to slander, the choices we make—to take the high road or the low road—affect our character, becoming

habits that hurt or habits that help ourselves and others.

"For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen." In case we don't get it the first time—and we rarely do—this is our second reminder to let God be God, to surrender our plans and desires so we can best discern the will of God for us.

Through the words that Jesus taught us we can listen for the "still small voice" whether encountered in prayer and worship—or in a job or relationship that falls apart despite our every attempt to save it.

Fourteenth-century Christian mystic Julian of Norwich put it this way: "This is our Lord's will... that our prayer and our trust, alike, be large."

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Let go and let God.

to fix things or worry about an outcome—I need to repeat to myself, "Your will, not mine, be done, O Lord! Your will, not mine, be done!" I wish I could report on the ways this has changed my heart and mind, but the surrender of my will is still very much a work in progress, as it is for most of us. It's why we keep repeating the basic truth of the Serenity Prayer—since we humans have long had the reputation for wanting to "play God" with life.

"Give us this day our daily bread" teaches us to be satisfied with what we have—a sunny day, an old car that still runs, our health, our community. And it reminds us to be grateful for what's enough and not pine for more, more, more.

"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us" trains our hearts to be merciful,

Waiting with Patience and Hope

Opening

Hymn “O Master, Let Me Walk with You”

(*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 818)

Text

READ ISAIAH 40:28–31

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Prayer

Gracious and holy God, give us diligence to seek you, wisdom to perceive you, and patience to wait for you. Grant us, O God, a mind to meditate on you; eyes to behold you; ears to listen for your word; a heart to love you; and a life to proclaim you; through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen. (*ELW*, p. 76)

Who Wants to Wait?

In our first session we explored the importance of being persistent in prayer and were encouraged to model our prayer lives on the wonderful widow who wouldn’t wince when confronting the wicked (judge, that is). In this session we look at waiting from a biblical perspective and try to discern the relationship between waiting and prayer.

I don’t know about you, but waiting is not one of my strong suits. Patience is not a fruit of the spirit (Galatians 5:22) that has ripened yet in my faith journey. In fact, one of the reasons I enjoy Advent as much as I do is so I can practice that which does not come naturally to me—namely, waiting!

Seriously, I don’t like waiting. And it’s pretty hard to avoid doing so in this increasingly busy and over-crowded world. I get into the “express” line at the grocery store and wait. Fast food is not only unhealthy, but it’s often served slowly. With a confirmed appointment, I wait at the doctor’s office. Last summer I actually waited for more than an hour in line to view the body of a deceased co-worker and extend my condolences to her family.

I’m pretty sure you know what I’m talking about. We wait at the mechanic’s, at the concert, and even in the communion line at church. Is it any wonder that when we pray we want our prayers answered in a hurry, or at least in our desired time-frame and not necessarily God’s?

While waiting may be difficult for some of us, Scripture encourages waiting as one of the most important spiritual practices. Time and time again, we are urged to wait upon God.

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Read these passages from the Psalms and see what they have to say about waiting: Psalm 27:14; Psalm 33:20–22; Psalm 37:5–7; Psalm 38:15–16; Psalm 40:1–3; Psalm 62:1–2; Psalm 130.

Some of these psalms indicate that while we are waiting God is working. What are some of the

things God is doing while we wait? These psalms also suggest a connection between waiting, trusting, and hope. How do you understand these connections?

Waiting and Weight Loss

This subhead may have fooled you into thinking that by participating in this Bible study you might get thin. Sadly, I have no magic formula for shedding pounds. However, I do think there is a correlation between our ability to wait upon the Lord and the emotional or spiritual "weight" that we carry. One of our needs in waiting on the Lord is the need to cast our weighty burdens on God. It's like the hymn-writer said, "We should never be discouraged, take it to the Lord in prayer."

Someone once said, "If you pray, why worry? And if you worry, why pray?" As simple as this adage sounds, it's much harder to practice than it is to preach. Some of us carry so many burdens around that waiting on God in prayer seems like just one more thing to add to our "to do" list. We take our burdens to the Lord—and instead of leaving them with God, we take them right back again at the end of our conversation. (Read "Changed by Prayer," p. 26.)

But if we were to truly take our weighty matters to God and then wait for God to deal with them—to help us forgive the sibling who hurt us deeply; to open up doors to a new job; to find the right continuing-care facility in which to place our beloved and aging parents—if we could earnestly turn these burdens over to God and wait for God's response, we would indeed feel lighter, both emotionally and spiritually.

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

What does it mean then to wait upon our God? Think of a time when you "cast your burden upon the Lord" as it says in Psalm 55:22. How did you feel when you "let go and let God"?

Waiting Takes Time

When the psalmist wrote in Psalm 130: "I wait for you, O LORD, my soul waits; in your word is my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than those who keep watch for the morning, more than those who keep watch for the morning," (*ELW* Psalm 130:5–6) he was comparing waiting expectantly on the Lord to the guards who kept watch over the city at night.

The hours often seem to pass so slowly in the evening. Even though the same 60 seconds per minute are ticking by as in the daylight, somehow when the sun sets the time appears to lengthen. One thinks of nurses who work the late shift watching over their patients while the rest of the world sleeps, or of police officers who protect the city streets under the cover of darkness while the TV entertains us.

For the psalmist, waiting for God was a more intense experience than what the night guards went through as they watched the clock in anticipation of the dawn and their release from duty. Daybreak was certain, but not without the passage of time. When we wait for the morning, like the guards of the city, we are waiting for more than simply the passing of time. We are waiting for the sun to rise and day to break, for the light to replace the darkness, for the evening chill to be replaced by the warmth of the sun.

Waiting involves an expectation of something special. Waiting means anticipation, expectation, and confident hope that something will indeed take place. Ultimately, waiting on the Lord is like waiting on the sun to rise—waiting expectantly for the Lord's answers to human needs, just as the sun brings the warmth of the day.

I once heard the Rev. Dr. James Forbes preach an amazing sermon on Hannah, mother of Samuel. Hannah waited a very long time to conceive Samuel and was regularly ridiculed for being childless by her

rival wife, Peninnah. Nevertheless, Hannah prayed and waited, waited and prayed.

Although her story is brief, it is powerful. And the text in 1 Samuel 1:20 says that in “due time” that is, in God’s time, Hannah did become pregnant and give birth to Samuel. Forbes used Hannah’s name as an acrostic and proclaimed, that when “Human Agendas and Needs meet the Needs and Agendas of Heaven, (HANNAH) there’s going to be a bright star rising.” Hannah prayed and waited expectantly upon God and God granted her the gift of that bright and shining star among prophets, Samuel.

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

For what have you waited and how? Share a time when you prayed fervently for something and waited for God to answer. Did you receive an answer to your prayer? Was the answer what you were expecting or something different? What was the waiting time like for you?

For Whom are We Waiting?

When I was a little girl, I used to play a trust game with my father. Dad would tell me to climb up two or three stairs and wait until he’d tell me to jump as he stood ready to catch me. Each time I did this I’d laugh with delight as Daddy said, “Jump.” I would dutifully obey and land safely within his strong, loving arms. With each successive jump my father would challenge me to go higher and higher until finally I was at the top of the landing, 12 to 13 steps above where Dad was at the base of the staircase.

After practicing this maneuver three or four times, there was absolutely no doubt in my mind that my father would catch me. Still, the height was a bit scary for a little kid. But when Dad said, “Jump,” I would jump, flying through the air down the staircase. And Dad never once dropped me; he never let me fall. Without knowing my dad and trusting him completely, I never would have had the courage to take those won-

derful leaps of faith and go flying into his arms. Our life of waiting on God in prayer is similar. When we wait on God, we are waiting for the One who knows and loves us to act for us. Our ability to wait on the Lord stems from being confident and focused on who God is and what God is doing. It’s based on trusting God’s promises, purposes, and power as revealed to us in Scripture as well as through our own individual stories of God acting in our lives and world.

God Never Grows Weary

This is what Isaiah knew when he wrote those wonderful and poetic words that were in our reading earlier. The ancient Israelites believed that God had forsaken them because of their rebelliousness. They had been driven out of their homes when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem back in 587 B.C. (Ancient Babylon is near where modern-day Iraq is.)

Now, some 40 years later, they are exiles in a foreign land, strangers and outsiders at best. And they are never allowed to forget, not even for one moment, that where they are is not their home. They are constantly reminded of the tragic truth that they are a subdued people, a conquered nation.

But these conquered people are also a covenant people. They’ve heard stories about Yahweh, about the God of their ancestors. They’ve heard about the God who took their ancestors out of slavery in Egypt and led them into the Promised Land. They’ve heard plenty about the God of Abraham and Sarah and how they wished that Yahweh would come again to rescue them and take them home!

Many of us can appreciate the sense of despair and disappointment that these exiles were feeling. Perhaps our communal situation is not as grim, but individually or as a family we may not have escaped hard times. The message in Isaiah chapters 44 to 55 is addressed specifically to people who are experiencing or have endured trying circumstances. And the thrust of the

proclamation is clear: God is coming to comfort you, wait upon the Lord!

Indeed, if God, the Creator and Preserver of all things—who never wearies of caring for God's creatures and creation—is in control, then our chief response ought to be that of trust. We trust in God's unfathomable love and compassion towards God's children and wait.

Listen to how the good news unfolds beginning with the powerful preposition “but.” Even youth and young people who seem to have boundless energy get tired and fall exhausted, says the writer. ‘But’ hold on, there’s good news coming; ‘but’ wait just a little longer, something’s about to happen—‘but’ are you ready for the Lord to act? “But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

First, there is a general promise, “... those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength.” As we wait for God we are promised new strength to do whatever is needed. This includes emotional, moral, and spiritual strength—and undoubtedly physical strength too, since our bodies are often affected by our spiritual condition.

And the evangelist’s promise gets even more specific than just the renewal of our strength. We are promised that we will “mount up on wings like eagles,” that even in the midst of difficulty we will be able to rise above our problems and wait on God’s solutions. Thus, we become part of the solution by allowing God to keep our anxiety in check.

In addition to soaring like eagles though, we are assured that we will run and not get weary and walk and not faint. No matter how long the course, we can stay on it because God is with us. No matter how long the journey, we keep on keeping on because God goes with us.

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Have you or someone you know ever experienced the truth of Isaiah 40:29 and felt God’s power when you were exhausted or God’s strength when you felt powerless? Think about the questions in Isaiah 40:28, “Have you not known? Have you not heard?” How will people know about God unless we share our stories?

Prayer as Patient Waiting

From the psalmists to the prophets to our Savior, Jesus himself, the posture of prayerful waiting upon God comes with deep and abiding benefits. Whether our form of prayer is quiet devotion and Scripture reading, walking along the beach or through the woods, or gathering together with others in meditation and song, it is important that we learn to wait upon God. (Read “Speaking with God: Conversation Tools,” p. 12.) For God empowers us to face everything we need to be and do with renewed emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual strength when we lean into God’s presence through waiting. May it be so with you.

Closing

Many of our most beloved hymns and songs are taken from passages in Scripture. As a closing, read responsively Psalm 91 and sing together the popular hymn “On Eagle’s’ Wings” by Father Michael Joncas whose hymn is an adaptation of this psalm (*ELW 787*). Pray for those who wait: for the birth of children or the peaceful death of loved ones; for family members to return from war or for newfound meaning to life. And remember to pray for yourself with patience and hope.

Coming Next Session

Next session we will learn some about the power of prayer to change us and our circumstances, perhaps in surprising ways. 

Waiting with Patience and Hope

Welcome to our second Bible study session in which we will re-discover for some and learn anew for the others, the importance of waiting with patience and hope as we pray continuously. How did the first session go? As you prepare for this session, take some time in prayer and reflection to think about what happened during your first gathering. What did you learn about the women who attended? Are there any seasoned prayer warriors among you? If so, how might you enlist their aid as you learn about praying with patience and hope?

What did you discover during the brief feedback session? Taking notes during this time will be useful as you seek to make this Bible study opportunity as rich and relevant to this particular group as possible.

Be prepared as well to welcome any newcomers who might join your group for this session and think about ways to include them.

Praying the Psalms for a Week

The Psalm verses chosen for this session speak wonderfully about waiting on God. As you await God's wisdom to be revealed for you and your group, daily pray one of the following verses: Psalm 27:14; Psalm 33:20–22; Psalm 37:5–7; Psalm 38:15–16; Psalm 40:1–3; Psalm 62:1–2; Psalm 130. Read the passage aloud, focus on any special phrases or images that come to you, and then offer the group and its needs to God in prayer.

It Works If You Work It

When the first session was drawing to a close we suggested that you do a short evaluation of your

time together. Before you do the closing devotion of this session, it would be good to gather some feedback too.

Ask one or two of the following questions to get the ball rolling: What, if anything, in the session surprised you? Disturbed you? Challenged you? How might your prayer life change as a result of this session? What would be helpful for you as we conclude the Bible study next session?

Closing

The closing hymn “On Eagles’ Wings” is a sacred song composed by Father Michael Joncas, a Roman Catholic priest. It was written in 1979 after Vatican Council II when the Catholic Church began using vernacular hymns at Mass. Its words are based on both Psalm 91 and Isaiah 40:31.

“On Eagle’s Wings” is a very popular hymn throughout the Christian church and was used at many of the funerals of those who died in the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

As you prepare to end this session (even if you’re not leading the closing yourself) you might share this history of the song and invite participants to reflect on what they were doing 40 years ago when this song was written and how much the world has changed in these four decades. How does God continue to raise us up today? 

The Rev. Gladys G. Moore is an ordained pastor in the ELCA. For some 22 years she served as an urban pastor in Jersey City and Newark, N.J., and for 16 of those years she was also an assistant to the bishop of the New Jersey Synod. Pastor Moore now serves as Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Mass.

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The People of God: *Unity in the Midst of Diversity*

By Jensen and Linda Johnson Seyenkulo

You don't have to look very far to find disagreements among people, even people of faith. The disagreements can be intense and drive us apart. At the least, there is not much conversation between folks who feel differently from each other on any subject. In fact, if they are able to stay in relationship, it is often because they don't bring up anything controversial. That can work for a time, but as we have seen in many arenas lately, including our church, it can lead to broken relationships and disconnection.

The prophet Amos asks the question, "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (KJV) It is an important question for our time. It merits investigation, using biblical texts (central to our Lutheran understanding of faith), and intentional ways of communicating together

about some important issues in our faith community.

The 2010–2011 Women of the ELCA Bible study, "The People of God: Unity in the Midst of Diversity" is based on the Book of Faith initiative of the ELCA. It brings us into intentional conversation

around issues that divide us from each other.

We are your writers for this upcoming Bible study. We are married to each other and hopefully that brings us into unity more often than not! We want to tell you about ourselves and the topics for this year's

study. And yes, we do find that the two of us can walk together—even when we don't agree.

We are very happy and honored to be able to do this study. We love the church, we love Jesus, and we love a good discussion—especially one that involves our favorite book, the Bible, and topics that challenge and provoke us to think deeply. We also know how difficult it can be to stay engaged when presented with opinions that differ from our own. Like others, we have found ourselves wanting to be silent to keep the peace or to avoid the person with whom we disagree. But we have found that when we have the courage to stay engaged, we come away having learned and grown in meaningful relationships. We think this is vitally important for our growth as people of faith.

Meet Jensen

I am originally from Liberia, West Africa. The village in which I was born is located in one of the most remote parts of Liberia. We had no access to any form of Western civilization. Part of that reality is that I was not exposed to the church and

thus never heard the name of Jesus Christ until later in life.

By the grace of God, I was adopted by a cousin who took me closer to Western civilization. Although still remote, we lived in a small town where we had access to well water, automobiles, and formal education. We even occasionally had doctors and nurses come to our town to treat the sick.

At age 10 I heard of a missionary who, like the doctors and nurses, visited the town once a month. His hosts were the Christians on the other side of town. I developed interest in this missionary's story because I was told he showed "pictures on the wall and if you are lucky you will see yourself in the pictures." When Lutheran pastor Joe Wold came to town, he set up a small gas generator for his projector to show slides of what God was doing among the people in the region. He would then preach and extend an invitation for people to give their lives to Christ.

I went the first night with one purpose in mind: seeing myself in the pictures on the wall. That was the beginning of a journey from

which I have not looked back. I did not see myself in the slide show that night or in the months following, but I never stopped going to his services. My reason for attending changed: I started to look forward to what Pastor Wold said after the slide show. I was hooked, hooked on the good news of Jesus Christ. I could not get enough of it. I'm not even sure if Wold was a good preacher! I just got the message that God loved even me.

Without the knowledge or permission of my parents, I surrendered my life to Christ and was baptized following one of Pastor Wold's sermons. God had begun a new work in me that night. My thirst for God and God's Word could not be satisfied. I am still hungering and thirsting for God's Word. And I am happiest when I meet people like you who are excited about Jesus Christ and the written Word of God.

I just got the message that God loved even me.

Meet Linda

I'm a native of Minnesota but have lived in the Chicago area for the past 17 years. I grew up in the country outside a small town in northern Minnesota (let's give a shout-out to Aitkin) where my mother still lives. My life as a Lutheran (baptized as a baby) and the role of church and faith in my family led me into ordained ministry.

I went to seminary as a second-career student and have served in calls in Chicago and surrounding suburban areas. I love to read mystery novels (at least one a week), hike in the woods or walk along Lake Michigan, and watch movies with my husband and kids. My interests are in pastoral care, systematic theology, and anti-racism/cross-cultural work. I am particularly interested in the ways that our relationship with God intersects with all the circumstances of our lives and how we can share the good news of Jesus Christ across cultures and ideological lines.

Now my focus is staying connected with my kids and my husband, getting physically fit (after years of neglect) and partnering in ministry with the people of God at Trinity Lutheran Church in Park Forest, Ill., a place I love very much. I was so excited to write this Bible study because of my concern for God's people to stay connected to each other in the midst of differ-

ences that divide us. I feel strongly that this is how we come to a greater understanding of God's presence in the world.

Intersections

We met at seminary. The prayer group we were in cemented our relationship—and our interest in the intersection of faith, the Bible, and life. Together we have seen those intersections . . . in the birth and adoption of our children, the reality of civil war in Liberia, the rebuilding after that war, the different social realities of our two families, the congregational life of several churches (in this country and Liberia), the political realities of the United States and Liberia, as well as many other situations in our lives and the lives of our family and friends.

The topics in this study come from those interests. We have watched as differing views on almost anything from religion to politics to the kind of food we eat have led people to distance themselves from each other. We find ourselves tempted to move into friendship circles and professional circles of people who think and act like we do.

In this time and place in history, it takes real commitment to stay engaged with others who are different than us. Social pressures and the reality of our locations

(both social and physical) move us away from those who are different and into comfortable interactions with those who think as we do.

The book *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* by Bill Bishop shows how those differences have begun to shape our community life. We tend to live near, worship with, and talk to people who think the way we do. We found ourselves asking that important question from Amos, "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (KJV) That is our overall theme verse for the 2010–2011 Women of the ELCA Bible study.

Goals and hopes

We have several goals for our time together in God's Word over the next few months.

Friends often avoid dealing with difficult topics in the context of God's word. We want to put those topics on the table for groups like yours that are already formed. We also want to encourage careful and thoughtful conversation on these important realities of our life together as God's people.

Another goal is to provide a safe structure for discussion. We put together guidelines for group discussion, and we hope you will use them during your time together. They are useful in encouraging full participation. We have used these techniques



Jensen and Linda Johnson Seyenkulo (their three children in the background)

and know that they work. We also know that they will feel strange to you. We hope that for the good of the discussion and all the participants you will stick with it.

The study provides an introductory conversation and some action steps on issues of community life. Such complicated issues will not be resolved in one hour. So, in most of the sessions, we have offered resources for your time after your group is done with the study.

a sneak-peak

We begin the study with how we read the Bible. Biblical interpretation is at the root of many of the differences that divide us and it can

be a way we learn from each other. As we discover how others read the Bible, we find new ways to think about it.

After the first session on reading the Bible as a foundation, we then spend the next eight months on subjects that can make community or break it. We examine ideas like the body of Christ, evangelism and stewardship, spiritual gifts, race and culture, loving relationships in the context of the community of the church, difficulties that keep us from experiencing the wholeness of resurrection life, and what is at the heart of Lutheran worship.

As we begin, we thought you would like to know some of what

went into our decisions about topics, Bible passages, content, and format. We took turns writing the sessions so you may hear a difference in voice.

We thought about what has been in the news regarding church unity. We thought about what does not get discussed at church but is going on in people's lives every day. We had conversations with people about what is important to them and what troubles them.

We talked with each other from our differing perspectives: Jensen with a Ph.D. in New Testament and Linda with a master's degree in family social science; Jensen from Liberia, Linda from Minnesota; Jensen working at the ELCA churchwide offices, Linda as a parish pastor; Jensen as a man, Linda as a woman; Jensen as black, Linda as white.

We talked with each other from our unity: Christian, theological training, parents of three young Lutherans; people who are concerned about the health of our church. We thought about ways to bring voices that may not be heard in your community.

September will be here soon. We had a great time writing this study. Our hope is that you take it seriously, yes, but that you will relax and have a good time together in the Word. God bless your study and your discussion!

Power

Opening

Hymn "O Praise the Gracious Power" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 651) or "Take My Life, That I May Be" (*ELW* 685)

Text

READ EPHESIANS 3:14–21

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Prayer

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, but always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. (*ELW*, p. 86)

The Power of Prayer

In our first two sessions we learned about the importance of persisting and patiently waiting for God in prayer. In this final session we will seek to discover the power that is available to us as believers through the practice of prayer.

When I think of the word *power*, the first thing that often comes to mind is electricity, that invisible flow of energy or power which makes our lives easier. Even as you are reading this, you might be sitting near a fan or in an air-conditioned room, reading by a lamp, sipping a cup of tea whose water was heated on an electric stove.

My point is that electricity, while so necessary to our lives, is something we rarely think about until we do not have it. Like air and water, we tend to take electricity for granted. But we use electricity to do many jobs for us every day—from lighting, heating, and cooling our homes to powering our televisions, computers, washing machines, and countless other appliances and conveniences.

Of course, it is living within our North American context that makes it possible for us to have round-the-clock electrical service. In many rural, war-torn, and developing places and countries throughout the two-thirds world, electricity is either unavailable, or if it is available, may be so only sporadically at best.

Now imagine what life would be like if we couldn't plug in to a power source? Our sense of connection to others and the world would be severely limited and we might very well feel isolated and alone. Our ability to navigate through life is to a great extent dependent on our connect-

bility, our ability to stay continuously connected to our energy or power source so we can do what we need and want to do in life.

For Christians, prayer is one of our chief sources of power that enables us to connect to God. While worship is the main font from which God's baptismal grace and power flow to and through us, many of us only attend worship on Sundays, leaving six other days in which we need to connect to God through our Great High Priest, Jesus. Prayer is a way in which we make that connection or tap into God's power in Christ.

Both the context and the content of our prayers can be as varied as we are as individuals. The primary point is that we make the connection. It doesn't matter whether we're kneeling, standing, or driving; alone or in a group; praying spontaneously or through the *Lectio Divina*, a traditional way of praying meditatively with the Bible so that the Word of God can reach into our hearts and minds. The main issue is that we make the connection. (Read "Speaking with God: Conversation Tools," p. 12 and "Praying in Song," p. 22.)

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Do you have a favorite way of praying that you use more than others? Look at one of the settings of the liturgy in an *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* or *Lutheran Book of Worship*. How often are the words *pray* and *prayer* used within our liturgy? How would you describe the relationship between our liturgy and prayer?

Does "Plugging In" Make a Difference?

Often we wonder if our prayers are really heard and answered; we ponder whether our prayers truly work. When we ask these very human questions we are basically wondering about prayer's power or efficacy. Do my prayers make a difference at all—to God, to and for the one being prayed for, to and for me?

Yet the power of prayer is not dependent on the person praying; rather, it resides in the One who is being addressed in prayer. Time and time again, Scripture tells us that God hears and answers prayer. In Matthew 7:7–11, Jesus assures us that our prayers will be answered. He says,

"Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"

Even with Jesus' assurance that God does answer our prayers we wonder if we can we trust Jesus' promise. For sometimes we pray and do not get the answers we had hoped for. A marriage is strained and we pray for reconciliation only to have our sacred union end in divorce. We ask God to keep our son or daughter safe as they go off to war and instead they come home as amputees. How can we be confident that God is listening, especially when God's response to our prayers is not always what we expect?

The power of our prayers is not dependent on the person praying, the passion behind the prayer, or even the purpose of the prayer, for God answers prayers that are in accord with God's will. Sometimes God's answers are hard to discover and even harder for us to accept. But if we listen carefully, we will eventually discern what God is saying to us.

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray he taught them what we have come to know as "The Lord's Prayer." The third petition of the Lord's Prayer says, "Your will be done, on earth as in heaven." In his Small

Catechism, Martin Luther asks, “What does it mean when we pray that God’s will be done?” And his explanation is as potent now as it was when the catechism was first written. “In fact God’s good and gracious will comes about without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come about in and among us.”

A colleague of mine Pastor Barbara Berry-Bailey said it a different way. She wrote: “We want what we want, not what God wants for us. We pray ‘your will be done.’ We really mean: ‘Your will be done, my way.’ Although our prayer is answered, it doesn’t look exactly like what we had in mind.” God’s answers may not always be what we want to hear, but we can be confident that they will always be in our best interest.

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Re-read Matthew 7:7–11. While Jesus says, “Ask and it will be given,” the reality is that God’s answers to our prayers may take several forms: “Yes. No. Wait.” Or “This is even better!” Share a time when God answered your prayers. How did you know your prayer was answered?

For What Should We Pray and When?

If we believe that God hears and answers our prayers, even if in God’s own time and way, then what should we pray for and how often should we pray? Jesus taught us the importance of daily prayer. When he taught his disciples to pray, he told them to ask God for their daily needs.

Jesus also set an example of daily prayer by praying himself during all kinds of circumstances. He prayed at his baptism (Luke 3:21). He often withdrew to lonely places and prayed (Luke 5:16; Matthew 14:23). And of course, Jesus prayed as he faced his impending death. (Matthew 26:36–45, Luke 22:39–46; 23:34, 46). (Read “Between the Daily and the Divine,” p. 6.)

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

What is your prayer life like? Do you pray daily or multiple

times throughout the day? Do you have a favorite place to pray? Are there times you are more prone to pray than others? What are they?

Some people think that we should only take our most serious requests to God and leave the little things to our own devices. Others ponder the virtue of asking for such things as parking spaces or lottery winnings, questioning whether these requests are in accord with God’s will. But prayer is not magic. God is not some Santa Claus in the sky ready and willing to give us everything we write on our heavenly wish lists.

Some contemporary spiritual leaders would have us believe that prayer is as simple as attracting what we want through the positive energy we put out into the universe. The power of positive thinking is indeed biblical. St. Paul wrote in Philippians 4:8, “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” But I repeat, prayer is not magic; it is mystery.

While we do not know exactly *how* prayer works, we do know *that* it works. When we faithfully come into the presence of the living God through prayer, it changes things. In our conversations with God, which comprise both speaking to God as well as listening to what God has to say to us, we often gain insight, clarity, peace, and hope. (Read “Changed by Prayer,” p. 26.)

Reinhold Neibuhr’s “Serenity Prayer,” with which many of us are familiar, captures this sentiment well:

“God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as a pathway to peace; taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that You will make all things right, if I surrender to Your

will, so that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen."

God does indeed want us to earnestly come to God with our needs and hearts' desires. And God's help through the power of prayer is available for all kinds of requests and issues. Right before the verse in Philippians quoted earlier, St. Paul writes about prayer. He says in 4:6–7, "Do not worry about anything, but in *everything* by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Not only does God give us peace, but God's power working through us and available to us in prayer, enables us to do far more than all we might ask or imagine. The question is: Do we trust it?

Ten years ago, I was eager to support the ministries of those who were living with and dying from HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa as well as in the United States. I had met Bishop Ambrose Moyo of Zimbabwe and asked what he might do if he received some money to support HIV/AIDS work in his country. His response was immediate. He would help AIDS orphans.

Although I wasn't a cyclist at the time, I had dear friends who were involved with the Boston-New York AIDS Ride the previous year and had raised a few thousand dollars to support those living with HIV/AIDS in these two large U.S. cities. I wondered what would happen if I were to do the ride myself and ask folks to give two gifts: one to support those in the United States and a second-mile gift to care for those living in Zimbabwe.

The response I received was overwhelming! The New Jersey Synod of the ELCA became fully supportive of the idea, encouraging congregations and individuals to support the ride. Sunday school

children and congregations of those living in poverty got involved, sharing their limited resources for the sake of those who had even less. By the time the ride occurred, we had raised more than \$16,000; \$5,000 of which went to AIDS centers in Boston and New York City and the remaining \$11,000 was transmitted to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe (ELCZ) for AIDS ministries.

In 1999, \$11,000 U.S. dollars was the equivalent of almost half a million dollars in Zimbabwe currency. And this all came about because of a simple conversation and a trust in God's power to accomplish abundantly far more than all I could ask or imagine. The initiative was communal from start to finish. And God was glorified through the compassionate care of both the dying and the living.

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

How have you seen God's power at work through the prayers you have offered? Where have you experienced God's activity in healing, guiding or changing life's circumstances? How has that power been evident in your life?

Closing

Prayer is such a powerful force that we will never be able to fully plumb its depth and breadth in our lives of faith. My prayer is that throughout these sessions you have gained a deeper appreciation for the importance of persisting in your prayer life, of being patient, and for your growing confidence that prayer does change things.

Let's close these studies by singing a wonderful prayer by John L. Bell (*ELW 814*) "Take, Oh, Take Me As I Am." As you sing this prayer, ask God to use all that you have learned during these sessions to help you be and become what God would have you be—a beloved, gifted child of God and disciple of our Savior Jesus Christ. ♪

Power

Nelson Mandela was released from prison on February 2, 1990, after 27 years at Robben Island near Cape Town, South Africa. When the iconic freedom fighter came to the United States and visited New York City in June of that same year, 50,000 people gathered in Yankee Stadium to greet him. As he arrived, they repeatedly and enthusiastically shouted the very word he himself spoke when he stepped outside the prison gates: “Amandla!”

Some people had difficulty pronouncing the Zulu word for *power*. People yelled “A-Mandela” or “Awanda.” Some even called out “Amanda!” which prompted a confused police officer to ask a fellow officer, “Who is this Amanda, anyway?” For some, understanding the power of prayer can seem as confusing as trying to pronounce the Zulu word for power, *amandla*. Our task in this final Bible study session on prayer, however, is not so much to understand the power of prayer than is it to recognize and trust it.

Further Preparation

If you have a copy of Luther’s *Small Catechism*, reread the section on the Lord’s Prayer. You can find it on page 1160 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Luther’s explanation of the Lord’s Prayer petition-by-petition is both a wonderful teaching tool and a good devotional practice as you get ready for this session. One of the things that makes it so helpful is the down-to-earth way in which he reflects on this ancient prayer that Jesus taught us.

Praying When We Feel Powerless

One of the issues that may arise as you lead this session is the inevitable question of what happens when we pray and God’s answer is delayed or perhaps even “No.” It’s important to remember that you don’t have to be the fix-it person. Rather try to understand yourself as one who facilitates the individual’s or group’s ability to listen to their own voices. Should such questions arise, count on the group’s wisdom too. It’s amazing sometimes how the well-timed words of a fellow believer can calm our fears and settle our hearts even when we still don’t have solutions to our problems.

Feedback and Closing

Since this is the last session in this series, rather than doing a question form of evaluation, use the time to pray about ways in which the group has been challenged or has grown through these studies. Give thanks for the growth and the challenges and for one another. And be sure to offer your thanks for the privilege of leading the group. 

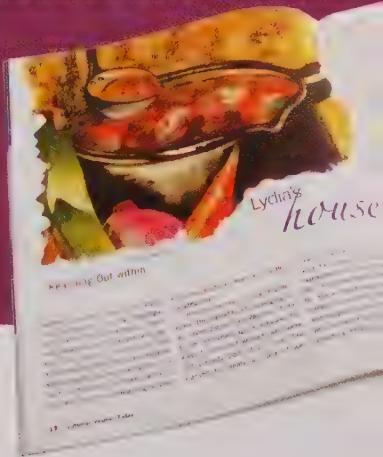
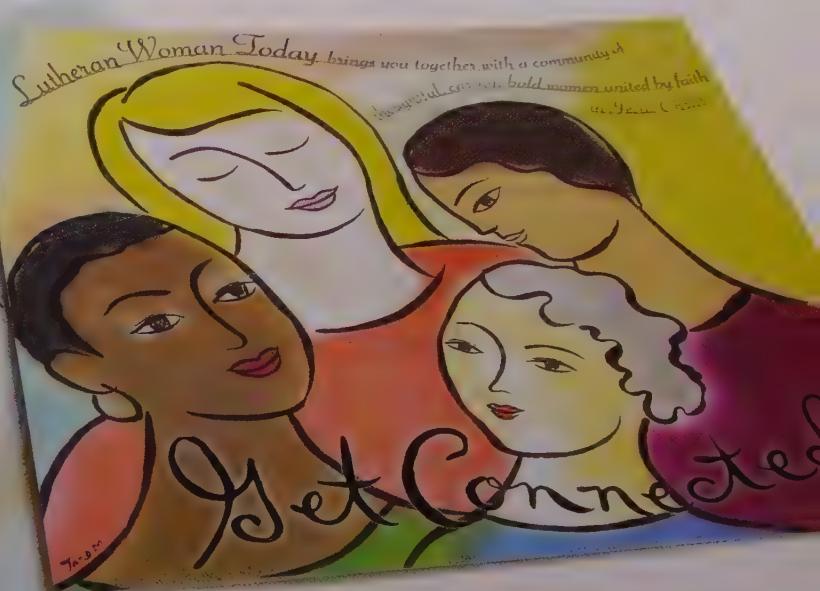
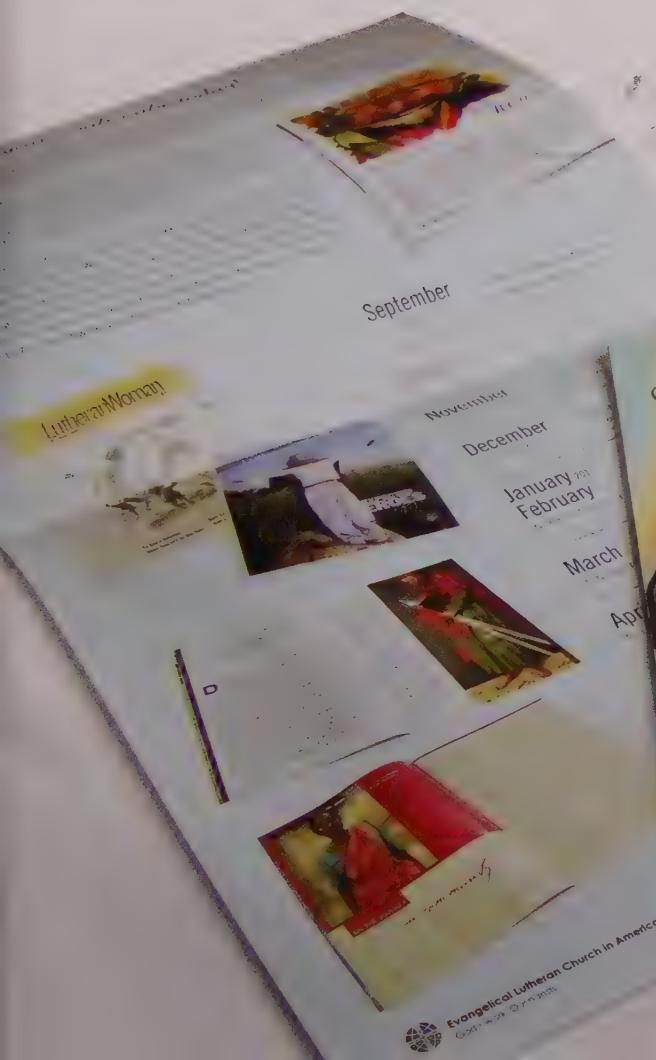
The Rev. Gladys G. Moore is an ordained pastor in the ELCA. For some 22 years she served as an urban pastor in Jersey City and Newark, N.J., and for 16 of those years she was also an assistant to the bishop of the New Jersey Synod. Pastor Moore now serves as Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Mass.

Has your group used this study for a one-day retreat? Let us know how it went. Email a brief description of your retreat (with photos, if possible) to lwt@elca.org.

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Every issue of *Lutheran Woman Today* brings you articles that inform, challenge, comfort, and encourage.

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Themes and Bible study

The 2010–2011 Bible study is "The People of God: Unity in the Midst of Diversity." This study looks at what unites us and defines us as people of faith. These days, the tendency is to stay focused on the issues that divide us. The goal of this study is to help us understand how our different backgrounds, life experiences, and perspectives can be shared as we study the Bible together and focus on our common faith in Jesus Christ. The theme verse is Amos 3:3: "Can two walk together except they be agreed?" (KJV)

The authors of the study are the Revs. Jensen and Linda Johnson Seyenkulo. You can learn more about them in the article on page 36.

What's coming up?

September

The Book of Faith

We believe the Bible is God's Word. Martin Luther called it "the cradle in which Christ is laid."

Session 1: Reading the Bible

Theme verse: Romans 15:4

Focus on Health:

The Miracle of Meditation.

Studies show meditation—sitting quietly with your thoughts, breath, or prayers—can help you ward off anxiety, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, substance abuse, binge eating, and even cancer. Here's how to start a regular meditation practice—and how it can help your health.

October

Life in Community

We were made to live in community, but it can also challenge us. We rely on God's grace to shape our lives together.

Session 2: Body of Christ

Theme verse: 1 Corinthians 12:25–27

Focus on Health:

When You Can't Eat Wheat

If bagels leave you bloated, cereal gives you constipation, and sandwiches make your tummy grumble, you could have celiac disease, which prevents you from absorbing gluten and triggers an immune reaction to this component of wheat. During October—Celiac Disease Awareness Month—here's how to recognize and treat this lifelong digestive disorder.

November

Entrusted with Much

The Scripture says that from whom much has been given, much is expected. How can we be faithful stewards of all that we have?

Session 3: Stewardship

Theme verse: 1 Corinthians 4:2

Focus on Health:

The Sensation of Smell

Autumn leaves, hot cider, cranberries, and sweet potatoes. During this season of sensational smells, here's a look at your nose, which cleans the air you breathe, prevents you from eating toxic foods, and is nothing less than a miracle of engineering.

December

Gifts in Grace

We need to discover and use our spiritual gifts to build up the body of Christ.

Session 4: Gifts of the Spirit

Theme verse: 1 Corinthians 12:4–7

Focus on Health:

Move it, Shake it

Fewer than half of American women get the 30 minutes of daily exercise that experts recommend. Here are simple, easy ways to get the exercise you need to fend off diabetes and high blood pressure and enjoy the longest, healthiest life possible.

January/February 2011

In Spirit and Truth

Worship is at the center of our life in the faith. It moves us and strengthens us to live out our calling as disciples of Christ.

Session 5: Worship Theme verse: John 4:23–24

Session 6: Race and Culture Theme verse: Acts 10:34–35

Focus on Health:

The Truth about Your Thyroid

Your thyroid gland gives you the energy you need, regulating your metabolism, heart rate, blood pressure, body temperature, and weight. But 20 percent of women experience thyroid problems, which can leave you too exhausted to function. During Thyroid Awareness Month, here's how to keep this vital gland working at its best.

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www.augsburgfortress.org. Go to Stores, Lutheran resources, *Lutheran Woman Today* magazine for an online order form.

March

Open Hearts

The song says, “all you need is love, sweet love” but we know that it is not a matter of how we feel—it’s about how we live.

Session 7: Loving Relationships

Theme verse: Matthew 22:36–39

Focus on Health:

Ending Endometriosis

When you have endometriosis, the tissue normally found in your uterus grows outside your womb and bleeds with each monthly period, causing severe cramps and even infertility. During March or National Endometriosis Awareness Month, here's the scoop on recent advances that can help women cope.

April

An Easter People

Sometimes we need healing and renewal to experience the joy of our new life in Christ.

Session 8: Barriers to Resurrection

Theme verse: Mark 16:3–4

Focus on Health:

Equal Health for All

African-American women are twice as likely as Caucasian women to develop diabetes, heart disease, lupus, and hepatitis C. During National Minority Health Awareness Month, here's a look at how health disparities affect women of color—and what our government is doing to address this injustice.

May

Telling the Story

When you have good news, you want to share it with the people around you.

Session 9: Witnessing and Evangelism

Theme verse: Acts 1:8

Focus on Health:

The Toll Trauma Takes

Women are more likely than men to experience severe trauma, which can trigger anxiety, insomnia, difficulty breathing, heart problems, and flashbacks. During May—National Trauma Awareness Month—here's what happens to your mind and body after trauma and how you can get help.

Go to

www.lutheranwomantoday.org
to see Bible study video
introductions as well as other
resources and articles.

Summer 2011 Bible study

Renew, Respond, Rejoice!

This three-session study carries the theme of the Women of the ELCA's Eighth Triennial Gathering. Written by the Rev. Catherine Malotky and the Rev. David Engelstad, this study will explore how we can renew our faith lives, respond to God's call, and rejoice in our many blessings.

Study Resources

The only piece essential for the “The People of God” study is a subscription to *Lutheran Woman Today* magazine; however, the following companion pieces add depth to the study.

Companion Bible

This handy volume puts the study texts in one convenient place. Printed in an easy-to-read size, it offers biblical texts for every session.

ITEM001619 \$3.95

Leader Guide

The Leader Guide provides the Bible study leader with additional background information not found in *Lutheran Woman Today*. Included are tips on how to lead the discussion, instructions for activities, ideas on prayers, and more.

ITEM001618 \$6.95

Applicable sales tax and shipping charges will be included when an order is placed. Call 800-328-4648 or visit www.augsburgfortress.org to order.

Bookmark

The “People of God” bookmark is a terrific way to promote the Bible study and makes a great gift for group members. It is sold in packs of 12.

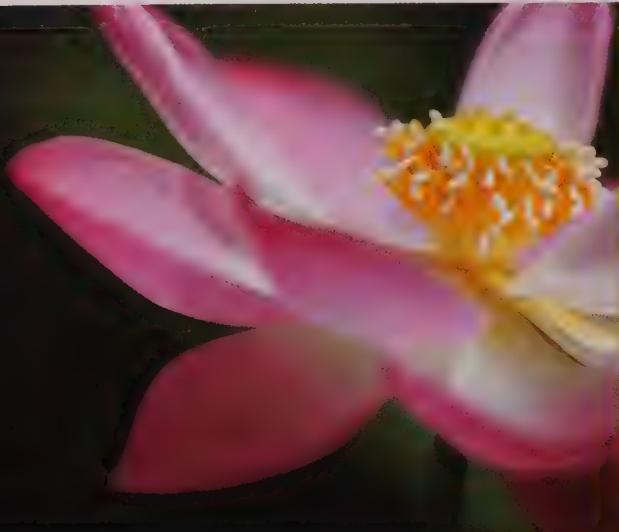
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DISCOVER your heart for service. Learn how to use your gifts and talents to nourish your community within and beyond church. Respond to your calling. Make a difference.





GRACE NOTES

Letting Go

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



I've been thinking a lot

about control recently. It started with total knee replacement surgery earlier this year. As with any surgery, I gave up control to the anesthesiologist. The anesthesia made it possible for the orthopedist to work on my knee without any pain to me but it also meant that I could not breathe on my own. I relied on a total stranger to manage my breathing during and after the surgery.

While recuperating from surgery, I watched a lot of home and garden television shows. For some, the basic premise is that someone other than the homeowner takes charge and renovates or redecorates a portion of the home. The homeowner gives up control over the project, allowing someone else to make the decisions.

Nearly every homeowner tells the TV host how difficult it is to give up control. Most agree, however, that because the designer has a good reputation and they've seen the person's work before, the decision to give up control is not as difficult as it might otherwise be.

I saw one segment where the homeowner was an airline pilot. She said that giving up control is a part of her daily work. When the responsibility for flying shifts from one pilot to the co-pilot, they must report out loud to each other the giving up of control and the acceptance of control. Given that discipline, it wasn't so hard for the pilot homeowner to let the interior designer transform her dated living room. What's your relationship with control? Most of us like to call the

shots. We do what we want, when we want it. Control is an illusion, though, isn't it? The weather happens, and we have no control over it. Think about the earthquakes and volcano eruptions that occurred this year. The economy takes a nosedive, and we have no control over it. We can save for that proverbial rainy day, but we can't control downsizing or layoffs. We prepare our children for the future, but we have little, if any, control over the decisions they make as adults.

Some of our control issues even permeate our relationship with God. Matthew records Jesus' teaching: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."

So we talk with God in prayer, raising particular needs or desires. Do we then trust God to provide? We know God's reputation. We know God's work with and for others. How many times do we fail to turn over control to God? How often do we think we need to step in? Too many times to count, I'm sure.

As the women in your congregation come together this summer in Bible study to explore prayer, what are you learning about control and prayer? What's the relationship between waiting and prayer? How does prayer bring about change? I especially pray for our organization, that the need for control some women bring not impede the work of the Holy Spirit in growing and shaping our collective future. May we "let go and let God." ☙

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.



AMEN!

What You Require of Me

by Catherine Malotky

They say, “Be careful what you pray for.”

When I was young, I prayed for love. I yearned for a soulmate who would sweep me off my feet, grow old with me, and inspire me to become all that I could be. For years, there was not a single person who filled the bill. God, you know I prayed, begged, and longed for such a person.

I know now, in hindsight, that you answered my prayer, even daily. I was surrounded by love. My mother and father were constant sources of encouragement and courage. My friends pushed me to learn more, to be creative, to imagine my life. My students and colleagues were an inspiration. Together we asked important questions. Together we became more than we had been. You gave me not one, but many soul mates.

Finally, in the fullness of your time, a single person walked into my life, when I was least expecting it, when I had resolved that the love you provided was enough. In the fullness of your time we, together, became more than single. We became a team. This one, my life partner, to whom I have made commitments of fidelity and support, has swept me off my feet when I most needed to be carried. We have leaned on each other when we needed to, and even, on occasion, we have pushed off of each other's spirits so that we might be even more clearly the unique ones you created. We have grown, we have grown up, and we can see ourselves growing wonderfully old, together.

Now, God, I pray for other things. Sometimes they are urgent, like the gift of catching all the lights so I can make it to the bus stop in time. Sometimes I beg your mercy for impatience, such a life-long theme. Sometimes I beg for contentment, so I might see the abundance that surrounds me and rejoice.

And sometimes, God, I pray for you to wake me up, to unsettle me, to push me forward, to make me hungry for your justice and mercy in the world. I am wary about these prayers, because I don't know what they will require of me. How will you answer?

Because the truth is, I value the comfort of my life. I am safe. My home is stable and healthy. On most days, I feel like I can manage. But the media bring testimony to me that justice is not the state of the world. So many are hungry, so many needlessly ill, or in danger. I have so much, and so many have so little. What will that mean for me? Where will I be called?

Give me courage, God, to pray that your will be done. Give me wisdom to hear your calling for me. Give me joy to live in the midst of uncertainty, trusting that you will answer my prayer with the well being of all in balance.

And God, give me a vision that extends beyond my own life, for the sake of all your children. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The Rev. Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.

PURPOSE STATEMENT



As a community of women
*created in the image of God,
called to discipleship in Jesus Christ, and
empowered by the Holy Spirit,*

We commit ourselves to
*grow in faith,
affirm our gifts,
support one another in our callings,
engage in ministry and action, and
promote healing and wholeness
in the church, the society,
and the world.*

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